THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy AND Science Fiction

Isaac Asimov
BILL AND I

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

JULY

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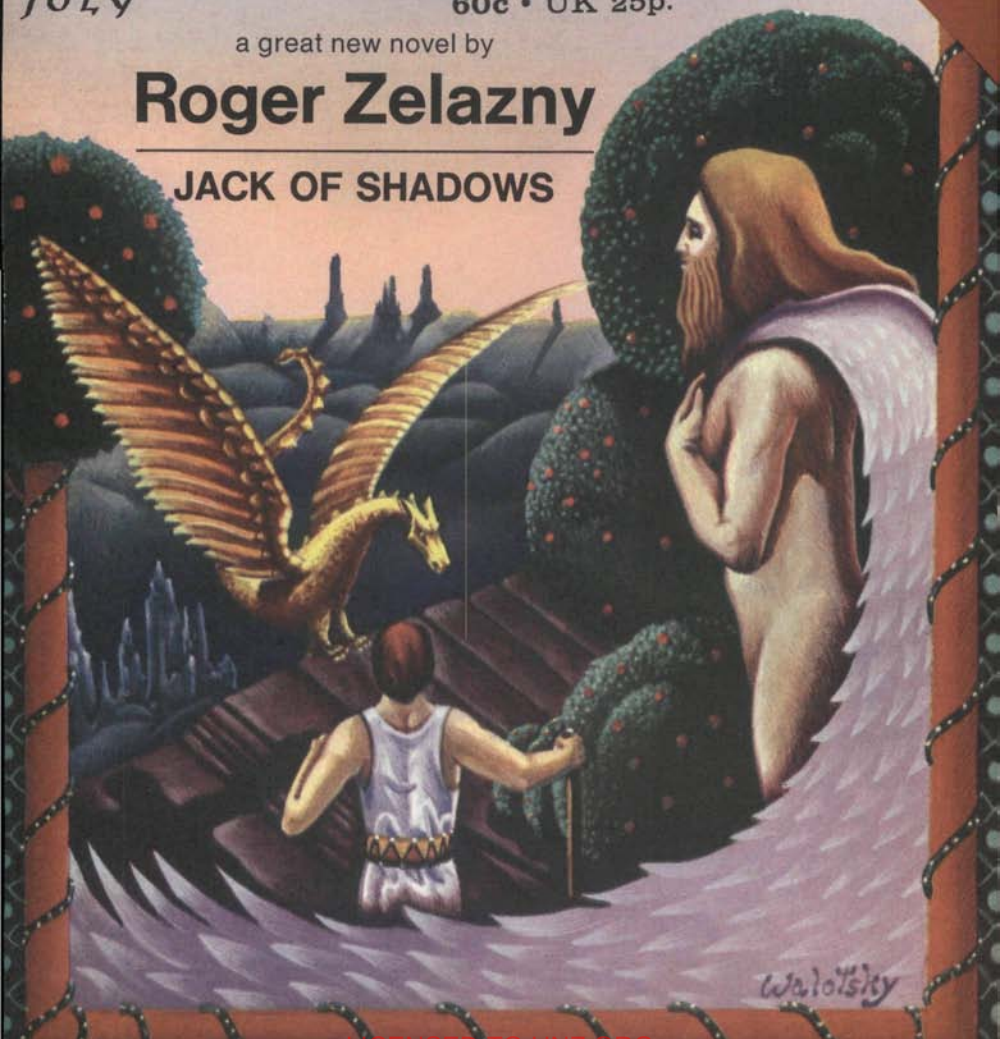
a great new novel by

Roger Zelazny

JACK OF SHADOWS



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

JULY • 22ND YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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In This Issue

Some sharp-eyed readers may have noticed a recent change in our text type face. It began with the May 1971 issue and with this issue has spread to the more obvious area of display type.

The reasons behind the change are both aesthetic and practical. It seemed time for a general sprucing up of the design, in an effort to give the magazine a more attractive and contemporary look. On the practical side, the change was generated by the fact that type for the magazine is now being set by computer. We recently went up to Concord, New Hampshire (where F&SF is printed) to get our first look at a typesetting computer, and, though its complicated facade of controls and flashing lights were quite up to our expectations, it turned out that the basic process was simple enough.

Typewritten manuscripts are transcribed to a paper tape that contains both copy and codes; the latter indicate type face, point size (a point is 0.0138 of an inch; this is 10 point type), column width and other instructions. This tape is fed into the computer, which, triggered by the instruction codes, refers to its stored programs, processes the copy and types out a proof (printout). The process takes about two minutes for the average story. The printouts are read, and corrections are made until the story is in satisfactory shape. The computer then turns out a tape compatible with a phototypesetter, which produces the type that appears in the magazine.

From a reader's point of view, the computer provides one sure benefit. The computer sets a tighter column; that is, the spacing between words and characters is reduced somewhat, but the spacing between lines remains the same. Over our 128 page issue, this results in a significant gain in wordage without any loss of legibility. You are now getting the equivalent of an additional 3,000 word short story in each issue.

So there you are; something for nothing, courtesy of computer technology. We may never in good conscience be able to publish another story about computers taking over.

—EDWARD L. FERMAN

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If you've been with us for some years, you will recall Hannes Bok's cover for our November 1963 issue, illustrating a story called "A Rose For Ecclesiastes" by a then unknown writer, Roger Zelazny. Since then, the writer has become very well known (through such work as "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth," "He Who Shapes," AND CALL ME CONRAD, LORD OF LIGHT); and the story has become a classic (it finished sixth in an SFWA Hall of Fame poll—behind Asimov's "Nightfall," Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon," Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God," Leinster's "First Contact," and ahead of every other story or novelet published between 1929 and 1964). We've been fortunate enough to publish a good portion of the best of Zelazny, into which category we unhesitatingly place his latest novel, the story of a world split into two cultures: darkside (magical) and lightside (scientific) and of a darkside thief called . . .

Jack of Shadows

(1st of 2 parts)

by ROGER ZELAZNY

I.

IT HAPPENED WHEN JACK WHOSE name is spoken in Shadow went to Iglés, in the Twilight Lands, to visit the Hellgames there, that he was observed while considering the situation of the Hellflame.

The Hellflame was a slim urn of silvery fires, gracefully wrought and containing a fist-sized ruby at the uppermost tips of its blazing fingers. These held it in an unbreakable grip, and the gemstone shone cool despite them.

Now, the Hellflame was on display for all to regard, but the fact that Jack was seen looking at it was cause for much consternation. Newly arrived in Iglés, he was passing amid lanterns, in line with the other onlookers, moving through the open-sided display pavilion, when he was first noticed. He was recognized by Smage and Quazer, who had left their places of power

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to come and compete for the trophy. They immediately moved to report him to the Games Master.

Smage shifted his weight from foot to foot and tugged at his mustaches until the tears rose in his squarish eyes and he began to blink. He stared up at his giant companion Quazer—hair, eyes, flesh all of a uniform gray—rather than regard the colorful bulk of Benoni, the Games Master, whose will was law in this place.

"What do you two want?" he inquired.

Smage continued to stare, blinking, until finally Quazer spoke in his flute-like fashion:

"We have information for you," he said.

"I hear you. Tell it."

"We have recognized one whose presence here should be cause for some concern."

"Who?"

"We must move near to a light before I may tell you."

The Games Master twisted his head on his bulging neck, and his amber eyes flashed as he glared first at the one, then at the other.

"If this is some sort of prank—" he began.

"It is not," said Quazer, unflinching.

"Very well, then. Follow me," he sighed, and with a swirl of his orange and green cloak, he turned and headed toward a brightly illuminated tent.

Inside, he faced them once again.

"Is this bright enough for you?"

Quazer looked about.

"Yes," he said. "He will not overhear us."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Do you know of one called Jack, who always hears his name if it is spoken in shadows?"

"Jack of Shadows? The thief? —Yes, I've heard stories."

"That is why we wished to speak with you in a brightly lit place. He is here. Smage and I saw him only a few minutes ago. He was studying the Hellflame."

"Oh my!" The Games Master's eyes were wide and his mouth remained open after the exclamation. Then, "He'll steal it!" he said.

Smage let go his mustaches long enough to nod, several times. ". . . And we're here to try winning it," he blurted. "We can't if it be stolen."

"He must be stopped," said the Games Master. "What do you think I should do?"

"Your will is the law here," piped Quazer.

"True . . . Perhaps I should confine him to some lockup for the duration of the Games."

"In that case," said Quazer, "make certain that there are no shadows in the place where he is captured or the place where he is to be confined. He is said to be exceedingly difficult to contain—especially in the presence of shadows."

"But there are shadows all over the place!"

"Yes. That is the main difficulty in keeping him prisoner."

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"Then either brilliant lights or total darkness would seem to be the answer."

"But unless all the lights be set at perfect angles," said Quazer, "and inaccessible, he will be able to create shadows with which to work. And in darkness, if he can strike but the smallest light, there will be shadows."

"What strength does he derive from shadows?"

"I know of no one who knows for certain."

"He is a darksider, then? Not human?"

"Some say twilight, but close to the dark—where there are always shadows."

"In that case, a trip to the Dung Pits of Glyve might be in order."

"Cruel," said Smage, and he chuckled.

"Come point him out to me," said the Games Master.

They departed the tent. The sky was gray overhead, shading off to silver in the east, blackness in the west. Stars dotted the darkness above a row of stalagmite-like mountains. There were no clouds.

They moved along the torchlit way that crossed the compound, heading toward the pavilion of the Hellflame. There was a flicker of lightning in the west, near—it seemed—to that place on the boundary where stood the shrines of the helpless gods.

As they neared the open side of the pavilion, Quazer touched Benoni's arm and nodded. The Games Master followed the direction of this gesture with eyes, to where a tall, thin man stood leaning against a tent pole. His hair was black, his complexion swarthy, his features somewhat aquiline. He wore gray garments, and a black cloak was draped over his right shoulder. He smoked some darkside weed rolled into a tube, and its smoke was blue in the torchlight.

For a moment Benoni studied him, knowing what feeling men know when confronting a creature born not of woman but of an unknown darkstroke in that place men shunned.

He swallowed once, then said, "All right. You may go now."

"We would like to help—" Quazer began.

"You may go now!"

He watched them depart; then, "Trust one of them to betray another," he muttered.

He went to collect his guard force and several dozen bright lanterns.

Jack accompanied the arresting party without offering resistance or argument. Surrounded by a party of armed men and caught at the center of a circle of light, he nodded slowly and followed their instructions, not saying a word the while.

They conducted him to the Games Master's brightly lighted tent. He was pushed before the table at which Benoni sat. The guards moved to surround him once more, with their brightly lighted

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lanterns and shadow-destroying mirrors.

"Your name is Jack," said the Games Master.

"I don't deny it."

Benoni stared into the man's dark eyes. They did not waver. The man did not blink them at all.

". . . And you are sometimes called Jack of Shadows."

Silence.

"Well?"

"A man may be called many things," Jack replied.

Benoni looked away.

"Bring them in," he said to one of the guards.

The guard departed, and moments later he returned with Smage and Quazer. Jack flicked a glance in their direction but remained expressionless.

"Do you know this man?" Benoni inquired.

"Yes," they said in unison. "—But you are wrong in calling him a man," Quazer continued, "for he is a darksider."

"Name him."

"He is called Jack of Shadows."

The Games Master smiled.

"It is true that a man may be called many things," he said, "but in your case there seems to be considerable agreement. —I am Benoni, Master of the Hellgames, and you are Jack of Shadows, the thief. I'd wager you are here to steal the Hellflame."

Silence.

". . . You need not deny it or affirm it," he continued. "Your presence is ample indication of your intentions."

"I might have come to compete in the games," Jack ventured.

Benoni laughed.

"Of course! Of course!" he said, swabbing away a tear with his sleeve. "Only there is no larceny event; so we lack a category in which you may compete."

"You prejudge me—and that unfairly," said Jack. "Even if I am he whom you have named, I have done nothing to give offense."

"—Yet," said Benoni. "The Hellflame is indeed a lovely object, is it not?"

Jack's eyes seemed to brighten for an instant, as his mouth twitched toward an unwilling smile.

"Most would agree on that point," he said quickly.

"And you came here to win it—in your own fashion. You are known as a most monstrous thief, darksider."

"Does that rule out my being an honest spectator at a public event?"

"When the Hellflame is involved—yes. It is priceless, and both lightsiders and darksiders lust after it. As Games Master, I cannot countenance your presence anywhere near it."

"That is the trouble with bad reputations," said Jack. "No matter what you do, you are suspect."

"Enough! *Did* you come to steal it?"

"Only a fool would say yes."

"Then it is impossible to get an honest answer from you."

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"If by 'honest answer' you mean for me to say what you want me to say, whether or not it is true, then I would say that you are correct."

"Bind his hands behind his back," said Benoni.

This was done. Then, "How many lives do you have, darksider?" the Games Master asked.

Jack did not reply.

"Come, come now! Everyone knows that darksiders have more than one life. How many have you?"

"I don't like the sound of this," said Jack.

"It is not as if you would be dead forever."

"It is a long way back from the Dung Pits of Glyve at the Western Pole of the world, and one must needs walk. It sometimes takes years to constitute a new body."

"Then you've been there before?"

"Yes," said Jack, testing his bonds, "and I'd rather not have to do it again."

"Then you admit that you have at least one more life. Good! In that case, I feel no compunction in ordering your immediate execution—"

"Wait!" said Jack, tossing his head and showing his teeth. "This is ridiculous on the face of it, since I have done nothing. But forget that. Whether or not I came here to steal the Hellflame, I am obviously in no position to do it now. Release me, and I will voluntarily exile myself for the duration of the Hellgames. I will not enter twilight at all, but will remain in darkness."

"What assurance have I of this?"

"My word."

Benoni laughed again.

"The word of a darksider who is a piece of criminal folklore?" he finally said. "No, Jack. I see no way to assure the safety of the trophy but by your death. As it is within my power to order it, I do so. —Scribe! Let it be written that at this hour I have judged and ordered this thing."

A ring-bearded hunchback, whose squint drew lines on a face as brittle as the parchment he took up, flourished a quill and began to write.

Jack drew himself to his full height and fixed the Games Master with half-lidded eyes.

"Mortal man," he began, "you fear me because you do not understand me. You are a daysider with but one life in you, and when that is gone you will have no more. We of darkness are said not to have souls, such as you are alleged to possess. We do, however, live many times, by means of a process which you cannot share. I say that you are jealous of this, that you mean to deprive me of a life. Know that dying is just as hard for one of us as it is for one of you."

The Games Master dropped his eyes.

"It is not—" he began.

"Accept my offer," Jack interrupted, "to absent myself from your games. Allow your order to be ful-

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filled, and it will be you who will be the ultimate loser."

The hunchback stopped writing and turned toward Benoni.

"Jack," said the Games Master, "you *did* come to steal it, didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"Why? It would be hard to dispose of. It is so distinctive—"

"It was in the nature of a favor for a friend, to whom I owe a favor. He desired the bauble. Release me and I will tell him that I failed, which will be no less than the truth."

"I do not seek your wrath upon your return—"

"What you seek will mean little compared to what you will receive, if you make that trip necessary."

". . . Yet a man in my position cannot readily bring himself to trust one who is also known as Jack of Liars."

"Then my word means nothing to you?"

"I am afraid not." And to the scribe he said, "Continue your writing."

". . . And my threats mean nothing?"

"They cause me some consternation. But I must weigh your vengeance—several years removed—against the immediate penalties I will suffer if the Hellflame is stolen. Try to understand my position, Jack."

"I do indeed," he said, turning toward Smage and Quazer. "You of the jackass ears and you—gynandromorph!—neither will you be forgotten!"

Smage looked at Quazer and Quazer batted his eyelashes and smiled. "You may tell it to our patron, the Lord of Bats," he said.

Jack's face changed as his ancient enemy's name was spoken.

Because magic is slowed in twilight, where science begins, it was perhaps half a minute before a bat entered the tent and passed between them. During this time, Quazer had said, "We compete beneath the banner of the Bat."

Jack's laughter was broken by the creature's passage. When he saw it he lowered his head and the muscles of his jaws tightened.

The silence that followed was interrupted only by the scratching of the quill.

Then, "So be it," said Jack.

They took Jack to the center of the compound, where the man named Blite stood with his huge axe. Jack looked away quickly, licked his lips. Then his eyes were drawn irresistibly back to the blade's bright edge.

Before he was asked to kneel at the chopping block, the air about him came alive with the leathery missiles that he knew to be a horde of dancing bats. More of them poured in from the west, though they moved too quickly to cast him shadows that mattered.

He cursed then, knowing that his enemy had sent his minions to mock him in his passing.

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When it came to a theft, he generally succeeded. He was irritated at having to lose one of his lives on a botched job. After all, he was who he was . . .

He knelt then and lowered his head.

As he waited, he wondered whether it was true that the head retained consciousness for a second or three after having been severed from the body. He attempted to dismiss it, but the thought kept returning.

But could it be, he wondered, that it was more than simply a botched job? If the Lord of Bats had laid a trap, it could only mean that. . . .

II.

Fine lines of light traced in the blackness—white, silver, blue, yellowish, reddish—mainly straight, sometimes wavering. They cross the entire field of darkness, and some are brighter than others . . .

Years, perhaps?

Slowing, slowing . . .

Finally, the lines are no longer infinite roadways or strands of web.

They are long thin rods—then ticks—hyphens of light.

Ultimately, they are winking points.

For a long while he regarded the stars, uncomprehending. It was only after a great time that the word "stars" seeped into his consciousness from somewhere and a tiny glimmering began behind his staring eyes.

Silence, and no sensations but seeing . . .

And again a long while, and he felt himself to be falling, falling as from a great height, gaining in substance, until he realized that he was lying on his back staring upward, the full weight of his being upon him once again.

"I am Shadowjack," he said within himself, still unable to move.

He did not know where he lay or how he had come to that place of darkness and stars. The sensation seemed familiar, however—the return—as of something experienced, previously, though long ago.

A warmth about his heart spread outward, and he felt a tingling that quickened all his senses. With this he knew.

He lay in the Dung Pits of Glyve at the West Pole of the World in the realm of the sinister Baron of Drekkheim, through whose kingdom all who seek resurrection must pass.

He realized therefore that he lay on a mound of offal in the middle of a lake of filth. An evil smile quirked his mouth as he considered for the hundredth time that while men begin and end in such fashion, darksiders could claim nothing better.

When he could move his right hand, he began to rub his throat, to massage his neck. There was no pain, but that last dread memory came vividly to mind. How long ago had it been? Several years, most

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likely, he decided. That was average for him. He shuddered and forced away the momentary thought of the time when his last life would be expended. This shudder was followed by a shivering which did not cease. He cursed the loss of the garments which by now had either moldered with his former body or, more likely, been worn to tatters on the back of another man.

He rose slowly, requiring air but wishing that for a time he could forgo breathing. He tossed aside the egg-shaped stone he had found in his hand. It would not do to remain long in one place now that he was almost himself again.

The East lay in all directions. Gritting his teeth, he chose what he hoped to be the easiest way.

He did not know how long it took him to achieve the shore. Though his shadow eyes quickly accustomed him to the starlight, there were no true shadows for him to consult.

And what is time? A year is one complete passage of a planet about its sun. Any subdivisions of that year may be determined in accordance with other motions of the planet. . . Or the notions of its inhabitants.

For Jack, the four annual fluctuations of the Twilight represented seasons. Within these times, dates were always to be determined more specifically by means of the stars—which were always visible—and the application of magical principles to determine the moods of their governing spirits. He knew that the daysiders possessed mechanical and electrical devices for keeping track of time—as he had stolen several of these. But since they had failed to function on darkside, they had been of no use to him save as trinkets to pass on to tavern girls as amulets of great contraceptive power.

Stripped and stinking, Jack stood upon the shore of that dark and silent place. After catching his breath and recovering his strength, he began his eastward trek.

The land slanted slightly upward, and there were puddles and pools of filth all about him as he made his way. Rivers of it ran stinking to the lake, as all filth eventually comes to Glyve. Fountains occasionally erupted, jetting high and spattering him as he passed. There were cracks and crevices from which the odor of sulfur dioxide constantly arose. Hurrying, he held his nose and prayed to his tutelary deities. He doubted that his petition would be heard, however, as he did not feel that the gods would devote much attention to anything emitted from this particular portion of the world.

Struggling with his memory as he would with a warehouse door, he entered and sought. He retraced his previous return journeys from Glyve, fetching back every detail that he could. But, seeking as he walked, there came no correspondences, no familiar landmarks.

When he skirted a small stand of

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metallic trees, he realized that he had never come this way before.

There will be no clean water for miles, he thought, unless Fortune nods and I come upon a rainpool. But it rains so seldom in this place . . . It is a land of filth, not cleanliness. If I tried a small magic for rain, something would note it and seek me. Without shadows, I would be easy prey as I now stand. Then I would either live in a vile way or be slain and so returned to the Dung Pits. I'll walk till death is nearer, *then* try for rain.

Later, his eyes described an unnatural object in the distance. He approached it warily and saw that it was twice his height and a double armspan in width. It was of stone and its facing surface was smooth. He read there the carved, large-lettered message which in the common darkside tongue said: WELCOME SLAVE.

Beneath it was the Great Seal of Drekkheim.

Jack felt a great sense of relief, for it was known to a few—those few who had escaped the baron's service—with whom Jack had discussed the subject, that such markers were placed in the most lightly patrolled areas of the realm. The hope was that a returnee would then undertake a lengthy detour, entering some area where chances of capture would be better.

Jack moved past it and would have spat as he did, but his mouth was too dry.

Shortly thereafter, he saw the place that would have to be his haven, for he could go no farther.

It was a place of tumbled, leaning stones, near to the foot of a sharp slope of rock which led on to even higher ground. He scouted the area, crawling, as best he could, seeking signs of life.

Detecting nothing, he entered. He moved as far within the stony maze as he could go, found a reasonably level spot, collapsed there, and slept.

He had no way of telling how much later it was that it occurred, but something within the deep pool that is sleep came to him and told him. Drowner-like, he struggled toward the distant surface.

He felt the kiss upon his throat and the alb of her long hair that lay upon his shoulders.

For a moment he lay there, mustering his remaining strength. With his left hand he seized her hair, as his right arm moved about her body. Forcing her away from him, he rolled to his left—knowing from his waking instant what must be done. With but a fraction of his old speed, his head dropped forward.

When he had finished, he wiped his mouth, stood and stared down at the limp form.

"Poor vampire," he said. "There was not much blood in you—which is why you wanted mine so desperately, yet were so weak in its taking. But I, too, was desperate in my hunger. We do what we must."

Wearing the black skirts, cloak

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and tight-fitting boots he had appropriated, Jack moved onto higher ground now, occasionally crossing fields of black grasses that wrapped about his ankles and attempted to stay him in his course. Familiar with these, he kicked his way through before they could fasten too tightly. He had no desire to become fertilizer.

Finally, he located a rainpool. He observed it for hours, from many vantages, for it would be an ideal spot to snare a returnee. Coming to the conclusion that it was unguarded, he approached it, studied it, then fell to the ground and drank for a long while. He rested, he drank again, rested, drank again, regretting that he lacked the means to carry some of it away with him.

Still regretting, he stripped and washed the filth from his body.

Later, he passed flowers that had the appearance of rooted snakes—or perhaps they were indeed rooted snakes. They hissed and threw themselves flat in their attempts to reach him.

He slept twice more before he located another rainpool. This one was guarded, however, and it took all the stealth and cunning of a thief to obtain a drink. Since he also obtained the dozing guard's sword, and as the man then had no further use for it, Jack supplied himself of the bread, cheese, wine and change of clothing that were available there.

The rations were sufficient for one meal. This, in addition to the fact that there was no mount in the vicinity, led him to the conclusion that there was a guard post in the neighborhood and that relief could be arriving at any time. He drank the wine and refilled the flask with water, damning the smallness of the container.

Then, as there were no nearby crevasses or caves wherein he might secrete the remains, he departed quickly, leaving there what was there.

He ate slowly as he moved, his stomach at first protesting this strange invasion of privacy. He finished half the food in this fashion and saved the rest. Occasionally, he would sight a small animal. He took to carrying several stones in his hands, with the hope of bringing one down. But they all proved too fast, or he too slow. He did, however, gain a good piece of flint when renewing his supply of stones for the seventh time.

Later, he hid himself when he heard the sound of hoofbeats, but no one passed near. He knew that he was deep into Drekkheim now, and he wondered toward which of its boundaries he was headed. He shuddered when he considered that at one point it abutted the westernmost boundary of that nameless realm which held High Dudgeon, place of power and keep of the Lord of Bats.

Toward the bright stars, from the dark ground, he hurled another petition, for whatever it was worth.

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Climbing, circling, sometimes running, his hatred grew more rapidly than the hunger within him.

Smage, Quazer, Benoni, Blite the executioner, and the Lord of Bats . . .

One by one he would seek them and have his revenge upon them, beginning with the lesser and building his power as he went, for that encounter with the one who even now might be too near for safe dreaming.

Nor did he dream well.

He dreamed that he was back in the Dung Pits. This time, however, he was chained, so that like Morningstar--who sits forever at the Gates of Dawn--he must remain in that place forever.

He awakened drenched with perspiration, despite the slight chill in the air. It seemed as if the noxious odors of that place had come to him briefly and in their fullest intensity once again.

It was not until considerably later that he was able to finish his rations.

But the hatred sustained him; it nourished him. It quenched his thirst or caused him to forget it. It gave him the strength to walk another league whenever his body bade him lie down.

Hating, he drove himself onward. But though the hatred warmed him, it did not serve to prevent an increasing awareness that the temperature was growing steadily colder, despite the fact that he had not attained a significantly greater altitude for a long while.

He lay upon his back and studied the dark globe that occluded stars at midheaven. It was the focus of the Shield forces--that sphere held perpetually away from dayside's light--and someone should be seeing to the maintenance. Where were the seven powers, of the listing in the Book of Ells, whose turn it would be to run Shield duty? Surely, whatever the internecine warfare of the moment, no power would fail to observe a Shield truce when the fate of the entire world hung upon it. Jack himself had run it countless times--even in league with the Lord of Bats on two occasions.

He longed to essay the spell which would give him sight of the current page of the Book of Ells, to see whose names were recorded there. It occurred to him that one of them might be his own. But he had not heard his name spoken since his awakening in the Dung Pits. No, it must be another, he decided.

Opening his being, he could feel the terrible cold of the outer darkness as it seeped about the edges of the orb at the Shield's apex. It was only an initial leakage, but the longer they waited the more difficult the sealing would be. It was too important to take chances with. The spell-wrought Shield kept the darkside from freezing into Allwinter as surely as their force screens prevented the daysiders from frying in the merciless glare of the sun.

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Jack closed his being to the inner chill.

He increased his pace and did not rest at the time he had planned. This hastened his good fortune, he decided, when he discovered a rain-pool. He found it free of surveillance, approached it, and drank his fill.

He could not quite make out his reflection in the dark waters, so he strained his eyes until his features became faintly discernible: dark face, thin, faint lights for eyes, silhouette of a man with stars at his back.

"Ah, Jack! You've become a shadow yourself!" he muttered. "Wasting away in a cruel land. All because you promised the Colonel Who Never Died that cursed bauble! Never thought it would come to this, did you? Was the attempt worth the price of failure?" Then he laughed, for the first time since his resurrection. "Are you laughing, too, shadow of a shadow?" he finally asked his reflection. "Probably," he decided. "But you are being polite about it because you are *my* reflection, and you know I'll go after the bloody jewel again, as soon as I know where it lies. She's worth it."

For a moment he forgot his hatred and smiled. The flames that burned at the back of his mind died down and were replaced by the image of the girl.

A pale face, with eyes the green of the edges of old mirrors, short upper lip touching the lower moistly in a faint pout, chin to fit within the circle of his thumb and forefinger, copper, catenary bangs over matching brows like the wings of a hovering bird, Evene her name and up to his shoulder her height, green velvet to a narrow waist, neck like the bark-stripped base of a lovely tree, fingers that move like dancers on the strings of the *palmyrin*, Evene of the Fortress Holding.

Born of one of those rare unions between darkness and light, the Colonel Who Never Died was her father and a mortal woman named Loret her mother. Could that be a part of the fascination? He wondered once more. Being part of light, does she possess a soul? That must be it, he decided. He could not picture her as a darkside power, moving as he moved, emerging from the Dung Pits of Glyve. No. He banished the thought immediately.

The Hellflame was the bride price her father had set, and he vowed to go after it again. First, of course, came the vengeance . . . . But Evene would understand. She knew of his honor, his pride. She would wait. She had said that she would wait forever, that day he had departed for Iglés and the Hellgames there. Being her father's daughter, time would mean little to her. She would outlive mortal women in youth, beauty and grace. She would wait.

"Yes, shadow of a shadow," he said to his other self within the pool. "She's worth it."

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Hurrying through the darkness, wishing his feet were wheels, Jack heard the sound of hooves once more. Again he hid himself, and again they passed. Only this time they passed much nearer.

He traveled on and he slept, and there were no further sounds which could be taken as pursuit. Heartened, he rested more frequently and occasionally deviated from the route he had set by the stars, to investigate formations which might hold rainpools or animal life. On two such occasions he located water, but he found nothing that would provide nourishment.

On one such excursion he was attracted by a pale red glow coming through a cleft in the rock to his right. Had he been moving more quickly he would have passed it unnoticed, so feeble was the light that emerged. As it was, he was picking his way up a slope, over gravel and loose stones.

When he saw it, he paused and wondered. Fire? If something was burning, there would be shadows. And if there were shadows . . .

He drew his blade and turned sidewise. Sword arm first, he entered the cleft. He eased himself along the narrow passage, resting his back against the stone between steps.

The passage gradually turned to the left, then terminated abruptly, opening onto a wide ledge that stood perhaps three feet above the valley's floor. He stood there and considered the place.

It was enclosed on all sides by high and seemingly natural walls of stone. Black shrubbery grew along the bases of these walls, and dark weeds and grasses grew at a greater distance from them. All vegetation ceased, however, at the perimeter of a circle.

It lay at the far end of the valley, and its diameter was perhaps eighty feet. It was perfectly inscribed, and there were no signs of life within it. A huge mossy boulder stood at its center, glowing faintly.

Jack felt uneasy, though he could not say why. He surveyed the pinnacles and escarpments that hedged the valley. He glanced at the stars.

Was it his imagination, or did the light flicker once while his eyes were elsewhere?

He stepped down from the ledge. Then, cautiously, keeping close to the left-hand wall, he advanced.

The moss covered the boulder entirely. It was pinkish in color, and it seemed to be the source of the glow. As he neared it, Jack noted that it was not nearly so cold in the valley as it was without. Perhaps the walls provided some insulation . . .

Blade in hand, Jack entered the circle. Whatever the cause of the strangeness of this place, he reasoned that it might be a thing he could turn to his advantage.

But he had taken scarce half a dozen steps within the circle when he felt a psychic stirring, as of something bumping, nuzzling against his mind.

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Fresh marrow! I cannot be contained! came the thought.

Jack halted.

"Who are you? Where are you?" he asked.

I lie before you, little one. Come to me.

"I see but a moldy rock."

Soon you will see more. Come to me!

"No, thank you," said Jack, feeling a growing sinister intent behind the aroused consciousness which had addressed him.

It is not an invitation. It is a command that I lay upon you.

He felt a strong force come into him, and with it a compulsion to move forward. He resisted mightily and asked, "What are you?"

I am that which you see before you. Come now!

"The rock or the fungus?" he inquired, struggling to remain where he stood and feeling that he was losing the contest. Once he took one step, he knew, the second would come more easily. His will would be broken and the rock-thing would have its way with him.

Say that I am both, though really we are one.—You are stubborn, creature. This is good. Now, however, you can no longer resist me.

It was true. His right leg was attempting to move of its own accord, and he realized that in a moment it would. So he compromised.

Turning his body, he yielded to the pressure, but the step that he took was more to the right than straight ahead.

Then his left foot began inching its way in the direction of the rock-thing. Struggling while submitting, he moved to the side as well as ahead.

Very well. Though you will not come to me in a straight line, yet will you come to me.

Perspiration appeared on Jack's brow as step by step he fought and step by step advanced in a counterclockwise spiral toward that which summoned him. He was uncertain as to how long it was that he struggled. He forgot everything: his hatred, his hunger, his thirst, his love. There were only two things in the universe: himself and the pink boulder. The tension between them filled the air like a steady note which goes unheard after a time because of its constancy. It was as if the struggle between Jack and the other had been going on for all that there is of time.

Then something else entered the tight little universe of their conflict.

Forty or fifty painful steps—he had lost count—brought Jack into a position where he could see the far side of the boulder. It was then that his concentration almost gave way to a quick blazing of emotion and nearly allowed him to succumb to the tugging of that other will.

He staggered as he beheld the heap of skeletons that lay behind the glowing stone.

Yes. I must position them there so that newcomers to this place will not grow fearful and avoid the circle of my influence. It is there

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that you, too, will lie, blooded one.

Recovering his self-control, Jack continued the duel, the piles of bones adding tangible incentive to the effort. He passed behind the boulder in his slow, circling motion, passed the bones, continued on. Soon he stood before it as he had earlier, only now he was about ten feet nearer. The spiral continued and he found himself approaching the back side once again.

I must say that you are taking longer than any of the others. But then you are the first who thought to circle as you resigned yourself to me.

Jack did not reply, but as he rounded to the rear he studied the grisly remains. During his passage, he noted that swords and daggers, metal buckles and harness straps lay there intact; garments and other items of fabric appeared, for the most part, half-rotted. The spillage from several knapsacks lay upon the ground, but he could not positively identify all the small items by starlight. Still, if indeed he had seen what he thought he saw lying there among the bones, then a meager measure of hope was allowable, he decided.

Once more around and you will come to me, little thing. You will touch me then.

As he moved, Jack drew nearer to the mottled, pink surface of the thing. It seemed to grow larger with each step, and the pale light it shed became more and more diffuse. No single point that he regarded seemed to possess luminescence of its own; the glow seemed an effect of the total surface.

Back to the front and within spitting distance . . .

Moving around to the side now, so close that he could almost reach out and touch it . . .

He transferred his blade to his left hand and struck out with it, gashing the mossy surface. A liquid appeared in the mark he had made.

You cannot hurt me that way. You cannot hurt me at all.

. . . And the skeletons came into view again, and he was very close to that surface like cancerous flesh, and he could feel it hungering for him, and he was kicking bones aside and hearing them crunch beneath his boots as he moved to the rear, and he saw what he wanted and forced himself to go another three steps to reach it, though it was like walking against a hurricane and he was but inches from that deadly surface now.

He threw himself toward the knapsacks. He raked them toward him—using both his blade and his hand—and he snatched also at the rotted cloaks and jackets that lay about him.

Then came an irresistible pull, and he felt himself moving backward until his shoulder touched the lichen-covered stone.

He tried to drag himself away, knowing in advance that he would fail.

For a moment he felt nothing. Then an icy sensation began at the

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point of contact. This quickly faded, was gone. There was no pain. He realized then that the shoulder had grown completely numb.

It is not so terrible as you feared, is it?

Then, as with a man who has been sitting for hours and rises too quickly, a wave of dark dizziness rushed through his head. This passed, but when it did he became aware of a new sensation. It was as though a plug had been pulled in his shoulder. He felt his strength draining away. With each heartbeat it became more difficult to think clearly. The numbness began to spread across his back and down his arm. It was difficult to raise his right hand and grope for the bag at his belt. He fumbled with it for what seemed to be ages.

Resisting a strong impulse to close his eyes and lower his head to his chest, he heaped the rags he had gathered into a mound before him. Then, left hand aching upon its hilt, he moved his blade beside the pile and struck it with the flint. The sparks danced upon the dry cloth, and he continued to strike them even after the smoldering had begun.

When the first flame arose, he used it to light the candle stub some dead man had carried.

He held it before him and there were shadows.

He set it upon the ground, and he knew that his shadow lay upon the boulder now.

What are you doing, dinner?

Jack rested in his gray realm, his head clear once more, the old, familiar tingle beginning in his fingertips and toes.

I am the stone who gets blood from men! Answer me! What are you doing?

The candle flickered; the shadows caressed him. He placed his right hand upon his left shoulder and the tingling entered there and the numbness departed. Then, wrapping himself in shadows, he rose to his feet.

" 'Doing'?" he said. "No. 'Done'. You have been my guest. Now I feel it only fair that you reciprocate."

He moved away from the boulder and turned to face it. It reached out for him as it had before, but this time he moved his arms and the shadows played upon its surface. He extended his being into the twisting kaleidoscopic pattern he had created.

Where are you?

"Everywhere," he said. "Nowhere."

Then he sheathed his blade and returned to the boulder. As the candle was but a stub, he knew that he must act quickly. He placed the palms of his hands upon the spongy surface.

"Here I am," he said.

Unlike the other darkside Lords, whose places of power were fixed geographical localities where they reigned supreme, Jack's was more tenuous a thing and liable to speedy cancellation, but it existed wher-

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ever light and objects met to make a lesser darkness.

With the lesser darkness about him, Jack lay his will upon the boulder.

There was, of course, resistance as he reversed their previous roles. The power that had compelled him fought back, became itself the victim. Within himself, Jack stimulated the hunger, the open space, the vacuum. The current, the drain, the pull, was reversed.

. . . And he fed.

You may not do this to me. You are a thing.

But Jack laughed and grew stronger as its resistance ebbed. Soon it was unable even to protest.

Before the candle bloomed brightly and died, the mosses had turned brown and the glow had departed. Whatever had once lived there lived no longer.

Jack wiped his hands on his cloak, many times, before he departed the valley.

III.

The strength he had gathered sustained him for a long while, and Jack hoped that soon he might quit the stinking realm. The temperature did not diminish further, and there came one light rainfall as he was preparing to sleep. He huddled beside a rock and drew his cloak over his head. It did not protect him completely, but he laughed even as the waters reached his skin. It was the first rainfall he had felt since he had left Glyve.

Later, there were sufficient pools and puddles for him to clean himself as well as drink and refill his flask. He continued on rather than sleeping then, that his garments might dry more quickly.

It brushed past his face so rapidly that he barely had time to react. It was as he neared a shattered tower that a piece of the darkness broke away and dropped toward him, moving in a rapid, winding way.

He did not have sufficient time to draw his blade. It passed his face and darted away. He managed to hurl all three stones he carried before it was out of sight, coming close with the second one. Then he bowed his head and cursed for a full half-minute. It had been a bat.

Wishing for shadows, he began to run.

There were many broken towers upon the plain, and one at the mouth of a pass that led between high hills and into the range of mountains they fronted. As Jack did not like passing near structures—ruined or otherwise—which might house enemies, he attempted to skirt it at as great a distance as possible.

He had passed it and was drawing near the cleft when he heard his name called out.

"Jack! My Shadowjack!" came the cry. "It's you! It really is!"

He spun to face the direction from which the words had come, his hand on the hilt of his blade.

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"Nay! Nay, my Jackie! You need no swords with old Rosie!"

He almost missed her, so motionless did she stand: a crone, dressed in black, leaning upon a staff, a broken wall at her back.

"How is it that you know my name?" he finally asked.

"Have you forgotten me, darlin' Jack? Forgotten me? Say you haven't . . ."

He studied the bent form with its nest of white and gray hair.

A broken mop, he thought. She reminds me of a broken mop.

Yet . . .

There was something familiar about her. He could not say what.

He let his hand drop from the weapon. He moved toward her.

Rosie?

No. It could not be . . .

He drew very near. Finally, he was staring down, looking into her eyes.

"Say you remember, Jack."

"I remember," he said.

And he did.

". . . Rosalie, at the Sign of the Burning Pestle, on the coach road near the ocean. But that was so long ago, and in Twilight . . ."

"Yes," she said. "It was so long ago and so far away. But I never forgot you, Jack. Of all the men that tavern girl met, she remembered you the best. —What has become of you, Jack?"

"Ah, my Rosalie! I was beheaded—wrongfully, I hasten to add—and I am just now returning from Glyve. —But what of you? You're not a darksider. You're mortal. What are you doing in the horrid realm of Drekkheim?"

"I am the Wise Woman of the Eastern Marches, Jack. I'll admit I was not very wise in my youth—to be taken in by your ready smile and your promises—but I learned better as I grew older. I nursed an old bawd in her failing years, and she taught me something of the Art. When I learned the Baron had need of a Wise Woman to guard this passage to his kingdom, I came and swore allegiance to him. 'Tis said he is a wicked man, but he had always been good to old Rosie. Better than most she's known. —It is good that you remembered me."

Then she produced a cloth parcel from beneath her cloak, unfastened it, and spread it open upon the ground.

"Sit and break bread with me, Jack," she said. "It will be like old times."

He removed his sword belt and seated himself across the cloth from her.

"It's been a long while since you ate the living stone," she said, and she passed him bread and a piece of dried meat. "So I know that you are hungry."

"How is it that you know of my encounter with the stone?"

"I am, as I said, a Wise Woman—in the real sense of the term. I did not know it was your doing, but I knew that the stone had been destroyed. This is the reason I patrol this place for the Baron. I keep

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aware of all that occurs and of all who pass this way. I report these things to him."

"Oh," said Jack.

"There must have been something to all your boasting—that you were not a mere darksider, but a Lord, a power, albeit a poor one," she said. "For all my figurin' has told me that only one such could have eaten the red rock. You were not just jesting then when you boasted to that poor girl about that thing. Other things, perhaps, but not that thing . . ."

"What other things?" he asked.

"Things such as saying you would come back for her one day and take her to dwell with you in Shadow Guard, that castle no man has ever set eyes upon. You told her that, and she waited many years. Then one night an old bawd took herself ill at the inn. The young girl—who was no longer so young—had her future to think about. She made a bargain, to learn a better trade."

Jack was silent for a time, staring at the ground. He swallowed the bread he had been chewing, then, "I went back," he said. "I went back, and no one even remembered my Rosalie. Everything was changed. All the people were different. I went away again."

She cackled.

"Jack! Jack! Jack!" she said. "There's no need for your pretty lies now. It makes no difference to an old woman the things a young girl believed—"

"You say you are a Wise Woman," he said. "Have you no better way than guessing to tell the truth from a lie?"

"I'd not use the Art against a power—" she began.

"Use it." he said, and he looked into her eyes once more.

She squinted and leaned forward, her gaze boring into his own. Her eyes were suddenly vast caverns opened to engulf him. He bore the falling sensation that came with this. It vanished seconds later, when she looked away from him, turning her head to rest upon her right shoulder.

"You *did* go back," she said.

"It was as I told you."

He picked up his bread and began to chew noisily, so as not to appear to notice the moisture which had appeared upon her cheek.

"I forgot," she finally said. "I forgot how little time means to a darksider. The years mean so little to you that you do not keep proper track of them. You simply decided one day that you would go back for Rosie, never thinking that she might have become an old woman and died or gone away. I understand now, Jackie. You are used to things that never change. The powers remain the powers. You may kill a man today and have dinner with him ten years hence, laughing over the duel you fought and trying to recall its cause. Oh, it's a good life you lead!"

"I do not have a soul. You do."

"A soul?" she laughed. "What's a soul? I've never seen one. How do I

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know it's there? Even so, what good has it done me? I'd trade it in a twinkling to be like one of you. It's beyond my Art, though."

"I'm sorry," Jack said.

They ate in silence for a time, then, "There is a thing I would like to ask you," she said.

"What is that?"

"Is there really a Shadow Guard?" she asked him. "A castle of high, shadow-decked halls, invisible to your enemies and friends alike, where you would have taken that girl to spend her days with you?"

"Of course," he told her, and he watched her eat. She was missing many teeth and had a tendency to smack her lips now. But suddenly, behind her net of wrinkles, he saw the face of the young girl she had been. White teeth had flashed when she had smiled, and her hair had been long and glossy, as the dark-side sky between stars. And there had been a certain luster in eyes the blue of dayside skies he had looked upon. He had liked to think it was only there for him.

She must not have much longer to live, he decided, as the girl's face vanished and he regarded the sagging flesh beneath her chin.

"Of course," he repeated, "and now that I've found you, will you accompany me back? Out of this wretched land and into a place of comforting shadows? Come spend the rest of your days with me and I will be kind to you."

She studied his face.

"You would keep your promise after all these years—now I'm an ugly old woman?"

"Let us go through the pass and journey back toward Twilight together."

"Why would you do this for me?"

"You know why."

"Quickly, give me your hands!" she said.

He extended his hands and she seized them, turning both palms upward. She leaned far forward and scrutinized them.

"Ah! It is no use!" she said. "I cannot read you, Jack. The hands of a thief make too many twists and turns and manipulations. The lines are all wrong—though they are magnificently ruined hands!"

"What is it that you see but do not wish to tell me, Rosalie?"

"Do not finish eating. Take your bread and run. I am too old to go with you. No matter. It was sweet of you to ask. That young girl might have liked Shadow Guard, but I am content to spend my days where I am. —Go now. Hurry! And try to forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

She raised and kissed each of his hands.

"When I saw the approach of him whom I had hated all these years, I sent a message by means of my Art and resolved to detain you here. Now I know that I did wrong. But the Baron's guard must already be hurrying in this direction. Enter the pass and stop for nothing. You may be able to elude them on the

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other side. I will try to raise a storm to obscure your trail."

He sprang to his feet, drew her to hers.

"Thank you," he said. "But what did you see in my palm?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, Rosalie."

"It does not so much matter if they capture you," she said, "for there is a power greater than the Baron's that you would face, and face it you will. What happens then is crucial. Do not let your hatred lead you to the machine that thinks like a man, only faster. There is too much power involved, and such power and hatred would not go well together."

"Such machines only exist dayside."

"I know. Go now, Jackie boy. Go!"

He kissed her forehead.

"I will see you again one day," he said, and turning, he dashed toward the pass.

As she watched him go, she was suddenly aware of the chill that had descended upon the land.

Beginning low and rising steadily, the foothills soon towered above him. He ran on, saw them give way to high, slanting walls of stone. The pass widened, narrowed, widened again. Finally, he pushed his panic away, held it at arms' length and slowed to a walk. It would serve no purpose to tire himself quickly; a steady, slower pace would allow him to cover more ground before fatigue overtook him.

He did things to keep awake: he counted his paces—a thousand, then a thousand more; he rubbed his eyes; he hummed several songs all the way through; he reviewed spells and incantations; he thought of food; he thought of women; he thought of his greatest thefts; he counted a thousand more paces; he rehearsed tortures and ignominies; he thought of Evene.

Then the high walls began to descend.

Soon he moved among foothills, not unlike those where he had entered. There were still no sounds of pursuit—indicating, he hoped, that he would not be caught in the pass. Once he struck open country again, there would be more places where he could hide himself.

There came a rumble from overhead, and he looked up to see that the stars were partly obscured by clouds. They had gathered quickly, he realized; and he remembered Rosalie's promise to try raising a storm to obscure his trail. He smiled as the lightning flashed, the thunder boomed, and the first small drops began to strike about him.

He deviated over a mile from what he felt to be his course; that is, the most expedient route of departure from the Baron's realm. Then he sought and found a group of boulders, encamped on the driest side of the largest, and slept.

He was awakened by the sound of hoofbeats. He lay there listening

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and determined that it came from the direction of the pass. He drew his blade and held it at his side. The rain still fell, but lightly now; the occasional peal of thunder that he heard came from a great distance.

The hoofbeats grew fainter. He pressed his ear to the ground, sighed, then smiled. He was still safe.

Despite the protest of his aching muscles, he rose to his feet and continued on his way. He resolved to travel for so long as the rain continued, to obscure as much of his trail as possible.

Eventually, the rain ceased. There was nothing but mud all about him, however, so he continued walking. His clothing began to dry, and the exercise expelled something of the chill he had taken.

The hoofbeats came and went again, somewhere behind him. Why spend so much effort to hunt down one person? he wondered. It had not been this way the last time that he had returned. Of course he had never come this way before.

Later, he struck higher, rockier terrain, leaving the mud below and behind. He began looking for a place to rest. The area was level, however, and he continued rather than be caught in the open.

As he struggled along, he saw what appeared to be a distant hedge of stones. Drawing nearer, he noted that they were of a lighter color than others in the vicinity and that they appeared to be regularly spaced; also, they did not appear to have been shaped by the forces of nature, but rather seemed hand-hewn by some monomaniac whose problem involved pentagons.

He found himself a resting place on the dry side of the nearest of these, and there he slept.

He dreamed of rain and thunder once again. The thunder throbbed continuously, so that the entire universe shook with its rumble. Then, for a long while, he dwelled half-aware in the borderland between sleep and wakefulness. On one side or the other, he felt that something was amiss, though he was not certain what or why this was.

I'm not wet! he decided, feeling surprise and annoyance.

Then he followed the thunder back to his body in its cloak, head pillowed on outflung arm. For a moment he lay there, fully awake, then leaped to his feet, realizing they had found his trail.

The riders came into view. He counted seven.

His blade came into his hand, and he threw his cloak back over his shoulders, ran fingers through his hair, rubbed his eyes and waited.

Over his left shoulder, high in the middle of the air, a star appeared to brighten.

It was senseless to flee on foot from mounted men, he decided, especially when he knew of no haven he might seek. They would only run him to ground if he fled, and by then he would be too tired to give a good accounting of himself and send

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at least a few of them to the Pits.

So he waited, only slightly distracted by the growing blaze in the heavens.

The cloven hooves of the seven black things struck sparks from the stones. Their eyes, high above the ground, were like a handful of glowing embers hurled in his direction. Wisps of smoke emerged from their nostrils, and occasionally they emitted high-pitched whistling sounds. A silent, wolf-like creature ran with them, head near the ground, tail streaming; it changed direction at every point where Jack had turned in approaching the stone.

"You will be the first," he said, raising the blade.

As if it had heard his words, it raised its muzzle, howled and raced on ahead of the riders.

Jack retreated four paces and braced his back against the stone as it came on. He raised the blade high, as if to slash, and seized the hilt with both hands.

Its mouth was open, tongue lolled to the side, exhibiting enormous teeth in the midst of a near-human grin.

When it sprang, he brought the blade down in a semicircle and held it before him, bracing his elbows, also, against the stone.

It did not growl, bark or howl; rather, it screamed as it impaled itself upon the weapon.

The impact forced the air from Jack's lungs and bloodied his elbows where they rested. For a moment, his head swam. But the screaming and the rank odor of the creature kept him conscious.

After a moment, it stopped screaming. It snapped twice at the blade, quivered and died.

He placed his foot upon the carcass and with a great, heaving twist withdrew the blade. Then he raised it once more and faced the oncoming riders.

They slowed, drew rein, halted perhaps a dozen paces from where he stood.

The leader—a short, hairless man of tremendous girth—dismounted and moved forward. He shook his head as he stared down at the bleeding creature.

"You should not have slain Shunder," he said, his voice gruff and rasping. "He sought to disarm you, not to harm you."

Jack laughed.

The man looked up, his eyes flashing yellow—and there was power behind them.

"You mock me, thief!" he said.

Jack nodded.

"Since, if you take me alive, I will doubtless suffer at your hands," he said, "I see no reason to conceal my feelings, Baron. I mock you because I hate you. Have you nothing better to do than harass returnees?"

Stepping backward, the Baron raised his hand. At this signal, the other riders dismounted. Grinning, he drew his blade and leaned upon it.

He said, "You were trespassing in my realm, you know."

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"It is the only route back from Glyve," said Jack. "All who return must cross some of your territory."

"That is true," said the Baron, "and those whom I apprehend must pay the toll: a few years in my service."

The riders flanked him, forming a semicircle like a half-crown of steel, enclosing Jack.

"Put up your blade, shadow man," said the Baron. "If we must disarm you, you will doubtless be injured in the scuffle. I should prefer an unmaimed servant."

As he spoke and Jack spat, two of the men glanced upward and continued to stare at the sky. Suspecting an attempt to distract him, Jack did not follow their eyes.

He leaped forward and beheaded the gaping man who stood at the end of the arc to his right.

He was able to split the next man's skull, through a hasty parry that came too slow as that one turned. By then, the Baron and his four retainers had turned and were upon him.

Jack parried and retreated as rapidly as he could, not venturing a riposte. The stone to his left, he attempted to circle it while keeping them at bay. They moved too quickly, however, and he found himself parenthesized. Each close-range blow that he parried now caused his palm to sting and sent a tingling sensation up his arm. The blade felt heavier with each stroke.

Realizing that he would soon be hacked to pieces, Jack resolved to take the Baron with him to Glyve if at all possible. He made ready to hurl himself upon him, heedless of the others' blades, as soon as an opening appeared in the Baron's defense. It would have to come soon also, he realized, for he felt himself weakening from moment to bloody moment.

As if sensing this, the Baron fought carefully, protecting himself at all times, allowing his men to lead the assault. Gasping, Jack decided he could wait no longer.

Then everything ended. Their weapons became too hot to hold as blue flames danced along the blades. As they released them and cried out, they were blinded by a flash of white light which occurred but a brief distance above their heads. Showers of sparks fell about them and the odors of combustion reached their nostrils.

"Baron," came a sugar-filled voice, "you are trespassing as well as attempting to slay my prisoner. What have you to say for yourself?"

Fear took root in his bowels, blossomed within his stomach as Jack recognized the voice.

IV.

Spots dancing before his eyes, Jack sought shadows.

The light faded as quickly as it had come, however, and the darkness that followed seemed near-absolute. He attempted to take advantage of the Baron and his men until he touched the rock. He began to

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edge his way about it.

"*Your* prisoner?" he heard the Baron shout. "He is mine!"

"We have been good neighbors for a long while, Baron—since the last geography lesson I gave you," said the now discernible figure which stood atop the rock. "Perhaps a refresher course is now in order. These markers serve to indicate the boundary between our realms. The prisoner stands on my side of the marker—as do you and your men, I might add. You are, of course, a respected visitor; and the prisoner, of course, is mine."

"Lord," said the Baron, "this has always been a disputed border—and you must bear in mind, too, that I have been pursuing this man across my own realm. It seems hardly fair for you to interfere at this point."

"Fair?" came the laughing response. "Speak not to me of fairness, neighbor—nor call the prisoner a man. We both know that the boundaries are limits of power, not of law or of treaty. For as far as my power reaches from its seat, High Dudgeon, the land is mine. The same applies to you in your place. If you wish to renegotiate the boundary by a contest of forces, let us be about it now. —As for the prisoner, you are aware that he is himself a power—one of the few mobile ones. He draws his strength from no single locale, but from a condition of light and darkness. His captor cannot but benefit from his services; therefore, he is mine. Do you agree, Lord of Offal? Or shall we re-establish the boundary this moment?"

"I see that your power is with you—"

"—Then we are obviously within my realm. Go home now, Baron."

Having circled to the far side of the marker, Jack made his way quietly into the darkness beyond. He had had opportunity to spring back across the boundary and perhaps precipitate a struggle, but whatever its outcome, he would have been someone's captive. Better to fly, in the only direction open. He moved more quickly.

Glancing back, he saw what appeared to be a continuation of the argument, for the Baron was stamping about and gesturing wildly. He could hear his angry shouts, though he had come too far to distinguish the words being shouted. He broke into a run, knowing that his absence would not remain unnoticed much longer. He topped a small rise, raced down its eastern slope, cursing the loss of his blade.

Resolving not to travel in a straight line, he turned to his left and headed in that direction. He was walking slowly, to conserve his strength; and as perspiration evaporated, he felt the chill once again. Or was it just that?

It seemed as if a dark form paced him, far to his left. Whenever he turned his head in that direction, it vanished. Staring straight ahead, however, he detected something of movement from the corner of his

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eye. It seemed to be drawing nearer.

Soon it was at his side. He felt the presence, though he could barely discern it. While it made no hostile movements, he prepared to defend himself at its first touch.

"May I inquire as to the state of your health?" came the soft, sweet voice.

Suppressing a shudder, Jack said, "I am hungry, thirsty and tired."

"How unfortunate. I will see that those conditions are soon remedied."

"Why?"

"It is my custom to treat my guests with every courtesy."

"I was not aware of my being anyone's guest."

"All visitors to my realm are my guests, Jack, even those who abused my hospitality on previous occasions."

"That is good to know—especially if it means that you will offer me assistance in reaching your eastern frontier as quickly and safely as possible."

"We will discuss the matter after dinner."

"Very good."

"This way, please."

Jack followed him as he bore to the right, knowing that it would be futile to do otherwise. As they moved, he occasionally caught a glimpse of that dark, handsome face, half-touched by starlight, half-hidden by the high, curved collar of the cloak he wore; the eyes within it were like the pools that form about the wicks of black candles: hot, dark and liquid. Bats kept dropping from out of the sky and vanishing within his cloak. After a long, silent while, he gestured toward a prominence that lay ahead.

"There," he said.

Jack nodded and studied the decapitated hill. A minor place of power, he decided, and within this one's reach.

They approached it, climbed slowly. When Jack slipped at one point, he felt a hand upon his elbow, steadying him. He noted that the other's boots made no sound, though they passed over some gravel.

Finally, "What became of the Baron?" he inquired.

"He has gone home a wiser man," said the other; and there was a flash of white within a momentary smile.

They reached the hill's level top, moved to its center.

The dark one drew his blade and used it to scratch an elaborate pattern upon the ground. Jack recognized some of the markings. Then he motioned Jack away, moved his left thumb along the edge of the blade, and let his blood fall into the center of the pattern. As he did this, he spoke seven words. He turned then and gestured for Jack to come and stand beside him once again. Following this, he drew a circle about them and turned to address the pattern once again.

As the words were spoken, the

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pattern took fire at their feet. Jack sought to look away from the blazing lines and curves, but his gaze was trapped within the diagram, and his eyes began to trace it.

A feeling of lethargy overcame him as the pattern took hold of his mind to the exclusion of all else. He seemed to be moving within it, a part of it . . .

Someone pushed him and he fell.

He was on his knees in a place of brilliance, and the multitudes mocked him. No.

Those who mimicked his every movement were other versions of himself.

He shook his head to clear it, realized then that he was surrounded by mirrors and brightness.

He stood, regarding the confused prospect. He was near to the center of a large, many-sided chamber. All of the walls were mirrors, as were the countless facets of the concave ceiling and the gleaming floor beneath him. He was not certain as to the source of the light. Perhaps it had its origin, somehow, in the mirrors themselves. Part way up the wall to his right, a table was laid. As he approached it, he realized that he was walking up an incline, though he felt no extra strain upon his muscles nor any sense of equilibrium disturbed. Hurrying then, he passed the table and continued on in what he deemed to be a straight line. The table was behind him, then above him. After several hundred paces, it was before him once again. He turned in a right angle from his course and repeated the walk. The results were the same.

There were no windows, no doors. There was the table, there was a bed, and there were chairs with side-tables scattered about the various surfaces of the chamber. It was as if he were confined within an immense, luster-hoarding jewel. Reflected and re-reflected versions of himself paced infinity, and there was light everywhere that he looked. There was not a shadow to be had, anywhere.

He seated himself in the nearest chair, and his reflection stared up at him from between his feet.

A prisoner of him who has already slain you once, he thought. Doubtless near to his place of power, in a cage built just for you. Bad. Bad . . .

There was movement everywhere. The mirrors showed an instant's infinity of motion, then all was still once again. He looked about, seeking the result of this activity.

Beef, bread, wine and water now stood upon the table that hung above him.

Rising to his feet, he felt a light touch upon his shoulder. He turned quickly, and the Lord of Bats smiled at him and bowed.

"Dinner is served," he said, gesturing toward the table.

Jack nodded, moved with him, seated himself, began to fill his plate.

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"How do you like your quarters?"

"I find them quite amusing," Jack replied. "I note an absence of doors and windows, among other things."

"Yes."

"Jack began to eat. His appetite was like a flame that would not be quenched.

"Your journey has left you quite wretched-looking, you know."

"I know."

"I will have a bath sent around later, and some fresh garments."

"Thank you."

"No trouble. I want you to be comfortable during what will no doubt be a lengthy period of recuperation."

"How lengthy?" Jack inquired.

"Who knows? It could take years."

"I see."

If I were to attack him with the carving knife, Jack wondered, would I be able to kill him? Or would he be too strong for me now? Or able to summon his power in an instant? And if I were to succeed, could I find a way out of here?

"Where are we?" Jack asked.

The Lord of Bats smiled.

"Why, we are right here," he said, touching his breast.

Jack frowned, puzzled.

"I do not—"

The Lord of Bats unfastened a heavy silver chain he wore about his neck. A gleaming jewel hung suspended from it. He leaned forward and extended his hand.

"Study it for a moment, Jack," he said.

Jack touched it with his fingertips, weighed it, turned it.

"Well, would it be worth stealing?"

"Most likely. What sort of stone is it?"

"It is not actually a stone. It is this room. Consider the shape."

Jack did, shifting his eyes from the stone to the walls and back, several times.

"Its shape is quite similar to that of this chamber . . ."

"It is identical. It must be, because they are one and the same thing."

"I fail to follow—"

"Take it. Hold it near to your eye. Consider its interior."

Jack raised it, closed one eye, squinted, stared.

"Inside . . ." he said. "There is a tiny replica of this chamber inside . . ."

"Look for this table."

"I see it! And I see us seated at it! I am—I am studying—this stone!"

"Excellent!" the Lord of Bats applauded.

Jack released it and the other raised it by its chain.

"Please observe," he said.

He moved his free hand toward it, enclosed the suspended gem in his fist.

There was darkness. It remained but a moment, departed as he loosened his grip.

Then he took a candle from beneath his cloak, wedged it into a

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hole in the table, and struck a light to it. He swung the pendant near to the flame.

The chamber became warm, uncomfortably so. After a moment, the heat grew oppressive, and Jack felt beads of perspiration begin upon his forehead.

"Enough!" he said. "There is no need to roast us!"

The other extinguished the flame and dipped the pendant into the water decanter. There came an immediate cooling.

"Where are we?" Jack repeated.

"Why, I wear us about my neck," said the Lord of Bats, replacing the chain.

"A good trick. Where are you now?"

"Here."

"Within the gem?"

"Yes."

"And you are wearing the gem."

"Obviously. —Yes, it is a very good trick. It did not take me very long to work it out and to set it up. After all, I am doubtless the most capable of all the sorcerers—despite the fact that some of my most precious manuscripts dealing with the Art were stolen many years ago."

"How unfortunate a loss. I should think you would have guarded such documents most carefully."

"They were well guarded. There was a fire, however. During the confusion, the thief was able to remove them and escape into the shadows."

"I see," said Jack, finishing a final piece of bread and sipping his wine. "Was the thief apprehended?"

"Oh, yes. Later he was, and executed. But I am not finished with him yet."

"Oh?" said Jack. "What are your plans now?"

"I am going to drive him mad," said the Lord of Bats, swirling his wine within his goblet.

"Perhaps he is mad already. Is not kleptomania a mental disorder?"

The other shook his head.

"Not in this instance," he said. "With this thief it is a matter of pride. He likes to outwit the mighty, to appropriate their possessions. It seems to feed his self-esteem. If this desire is a mental disorder, then most of us suffer from it. In his case, though, the desire is often satisfied. He succeeds because he possesses somewhat of power and is shrewd and ruthless in its employment. I shall take great delight in observing his degeneration into a state of total madness."

"So as to feed your pride and self-esteem?"

"Partly. It will also constitute a bit of homage to the god Justice and a benefit to society at large."

Jack laughed. The other only smiled.

"How do you intend to achieve the desired result?" he finally asked.

"I shall confine him to an inescapable prison where he will have absolutely nothing to do but exist. Occasionally, I will introduce certain items and remove them again—items which will come to

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occupy his thoughts more and more as time passes, inducing periods of depression and times of fury. I will break that smug self-assurance of his by rooting out the pride from which it grows."

"I see indeed," said Jack. "It sounds as if you have been planning this for a long while."

"Never doubt it."

The Lord of Bats rose to his feet, gestured casually toward a point high above their heads.

"I see that your bath has been drawn," he said, "and that fresh garments were laid out for you while we dined. I shall depart now and allow you to avail yourself of them."

Jack nodded, stood.

A thud occurred beneath the table then, followed by a gibbering sound and a brief, shrill wail. Jack felt his ankle seized. Then he was thrown to the floor.

"Down!" cried the Lord of Bats, circling the table quickly. "Back, I say!"

Scores of bats escaped his cloak and darted toward the thing beneath the table. It shrieked with fright and so tightened its grip upon Jack's ankle that he thought the bones would be pulverized.

He raised himself and began to lean forward. Then even the pain was insufficient to prevent a moment's paralysis from his revulsion at the sight he beheld.

The hairless member was white, shiny and blue-blotched. The Lord of Bats kicked it and the grip was broken; but before it drew away and moved to cross the other arm, shielding the face, Jack caught a glimpse of that lopsided countenance.

It looked like something that had started out to be a man but had never quite made it. It had been stepped on, twisted, had holes poked into the sickly dough of its head-bulge; bones showed through the transparent flesh of its torso, and its short legs were thick as trees, terminating in disk-shaped pads from which dozens of long toes hung like roots or worms. Its arms were longer than its entire body. It was a crushed slug, a thing that had been frozen and thawed before it was fully baked. It was—

"It is the Borsnin," said the Lord of Bats, now extending his arms toward the squealing creature which could not seem to decide whether it feared the bats or their Lord more and which kept banging its head against the table's legs as it sought to avoid both.

The Lord of Bats tore the pendant from his neck and hurled it against the creature, uttering an oath as he did so. With this it vanished, leaving a small pool of urine where it had crouched. The bats vanished within the dark one's cloak, and he smiled down at Jack.

"What," said Jack, "is a Borshin?"

The Lord of Bats studied his fingernails for a moment, then, "For some time now the dayside scientists have," he said, "attempted to

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create artificial life. Thus far, they have not succeeded.

"I determined to succeed with magic where they had failed with their science," he went on. "I experimented for a long while, then made the attempt. I failed—or, rather, was only half successful. You have just seen the results. I disposed of my dead homunculus in the Dung Pits of Glyvé, and one day that thing returned to me. I cannot take credit for its animation. The forces that restore us at that place stimulated it somehow. I do not believe the Borshin to be truly alive, in the ordinary sense of the word."

"Is it one of the 'items' you mentioned, which will serve to torment your enemy?"

"Yes, for I have taught it two things: to fear me and to hate my enemy. I did not bring it here just now, however. It has its own ways of coming and going, though I did not think they extended to this place. I will have to investigate the matter further."

"In the meantime, it will be free to enter here whenever it chooses?"

"I am afraid so."

"Then might I borrow a weapon to keep with me?"

"I am sorry, but I have none to lend you."

"I see."

"I had best be going now. Enjoy your bath."

"One thing," said Jack.

"What is that?" asked the other, whose fingers were caressing the pendant.

"I, too, have an enemy for whom I contemplate an involved piece of vengeance. I will not bore you with details now, save that I believe mine will be superior to yours."

"Really? I would be interested to learn what you have in mind."

"I will see that you do."

Both smiled.

"Until later, then."

"Until later."

The Lord of Bats vanished.

Jack bathed, soaking himself for a long while in the lukewarm water. All the fatigue he had accumulated during his journey seemed to seize him then, and it took a mighty effort of will to rise, dry his body, and walk to the bed, where he collapsed. He felt too tired to hate properly, or to begin planning his escape.

He slept, and sleeping, he dreamed.

He dreamed he held the Grand Key of Kolwynia, which was Chaos and Formation, and with it unlocked the sky and the earth, the sea and the wind, bidding them to fall upon High Dudgeon and its master from all corners of the world, that there the flame be born and the dark Lord held in its heart forever like an ant in amber, but alive, sleepless and feeling. Exulting in this, he heard the sudden chatter of the World Machine. He moaned and cried out at this omen, and within the walls, infinities of Jacks twisted on sweat-drenched beds.

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V.

Jack sat in the chair nearest the bed, his legs stretched out before him and crossed at the ankles, fingers interlaced beneath his chin. He wore the red, white and black diamond-patched motley of a jester; his wine-colored slippers curled at the toes and ended in loose threads, where he had torn off the bells. He had discarded the quinopolous, and the belled cap had gone into the chamber pot.

Any moment now, he decided. I hope the Borshin does not follow him.

The air seemed to shimmer. There came a tone, not unlike the snapping of a fingernail against a goblet, somewhere near at hand.

Then the Lord of Bats was beside him, and this time he was not smiling.

"Jack," he began immediately, "you disappoint me. What were you attempting to establish?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You just completed some sort of weak spell a few moments ago. Did you really think I would be unaware of a working of the Art here in High Dudgeon?"

"Only if it succeeded," said Jack.

"Which it obviously did not. You are still here."

"Obviously."

"You cannot shatter these walls, nor pass through them."

"So I've learned."

"Do you find Time's weight increasing upon you?"

"Somewhat."

"Then perhaps it is time to introduce some additional element into your environment."

"You did not tell me there was another Borshin."

The other chuckled, and a bat emerged from somewhere, circled his head several times, suspended itself from the chain he wore.

"No, that is not what I had in mind," he said. "I wonder how much longer your sense of humor will hold up?"

Jack shrugged, rubbed idly at a smudge of soot on his right forefinger.

"Let me know when you find out," Jack said.

"I promise you will be among the first."

Jack nodded.

"I would appreciate it if you would refrain from further endeavors along magical lines," said the Lord of Bats. "In this highly charged atmosphere they could produce severe repercussions."

"I'll bear that in mind," said Jack.

"Capital. Sorry to have interrupted. I'll let you get back to your normal activities now. Adieu."

Jack did not reply, for he was alone.

It was some time later that the additional element appeared within his environment.

Realizing that he was not alone, Jack looked up suddenly. At the sight of her coppery hair and her

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half smile he was, for a moment, almost startled into believing.

Then he rose, moved toward her, moved to the side, studied her from several angles.

Finally, "It is a very good job," he said. "Give my compliments to your creator. You are an exceedingly fine simulacrum of my Lady Evene, of the Fortress Holding."

"I am neither a simulacrum, nor am I your lady," she said with a smile, curtseying.

"Whatever, you have brought me brightness," he said. "May I offer you a seat?"

"Thank you."

Seating her, he drew up another chair and set it to her left. Leaning back in it, he regarded her obliquely.

"Now will you riddle me your words?" he said. "If you are not my Evene nor a simulacrum composed by my enemy to trouble me, then what are you? Or—to be more delicate—who are you?"

"I am Evene of the Fortress Holding, daughter of Loret and the Colonel Who Never Died," she said, still smiling; and it was only then he noticed that from the silver chain she wore depended the strange gemstone that was shaped in semblance of his chamber. "But I am not *your* lady," she finished.

"He did a very good job," said Jack. "Even the voice is perfect."

"I can almost feel sorry for the vagabond lord of non-existent Shadow Guard," she said, "Jack of Liars. Being familiar with all forms of baseness, it has become difficult for you to recognize the truth."

"There *is* a Shadow Guard!" he said.

"Then there is no need for you to grow agitated at its mention, is there?"

"He taught you well, creature. To mock my home is to mock me."

"That was my intention. But I am not a creature of him whom you call the Lord of Bats. I am his woman. I know him by his secret name. He has shown me the world in a sphere. I have seen all places and things from the halls of High Dudgeon. I know that nowhere is there such a place as Shadow Guard."

"No eyes but mine have ever looked upon it," he said, "for it is always hidden by shadows. It is a great, sprawling place, of high, torchlit halls, underground labyrinths, and many towers. On the one hand it faces some light, and on the other the darkness. It is furnished with many mementos of the greatest thefts ever committed. There are things of great beauty there, and things of incalculable worth. The shadows dance in its corridors, and the facets of countless gems gleam brighter than the sun of the one-half world. That is the place you mock: Shadow Guard, next to which your master's keep is but a pigsty. It is sometimes, true, a lonely place, but the real Evene will brighten it with her laughter, touch it with her grace, so

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that it will endure in splendor long after your master has entered the final darkness as a result of my vengeance."

She applauded softly.

"You make it easy to recall how your words and your passion once persuaded me, Jack. I see now, though, that when you speak of Shadow Guard you speak too well to be describing a real place. I waited for you for a long while, and then I learned of your beheading at Iglés. Still, I was determined to await your return. But my father decided otherwise. At first, I believed his lust for the Hellflame ruled him. I was wrong, however. He realized from the first that you were a vagrant, a braggart, a liar. I wept when he bartered me for the Hellflame, but I came to love the one to whom I was given. My lord is kind where you are thoughtless, intelligent where you are merely shrewd. His fortress really exists and is one of the mightiest in the land. He *is* all things that you are not. I love him."

Jack studied her now unsmiling face for a moment, then asked, "How did he come to possess the Hellflame?"

"His man won it for him in Iglés."

"What was that man's name?"

"Quazer," she said. "Quazer was champion of the Hellgames."

"A moderately useless piece of information for a simulacrum to possess," Jack observed, "if true. Yet, my enemy *is* of the fussy, thorough sort. I am sorry, but I do not believe you are real."

"It is an example of the egotism that blinds one to the obvious."

"No. I know that you are not the real Evene, but rather a thing sent to torment me, because the real Evene, my Evene, would have refrained from judging me in my absence. She would have waited for my answer to whatever was said against me."

She looked away then.

"More of your clever words," she finally said. "They mean nothing."

"You may go now," he said, "and tell your master you did not succeed."

"He is not my master! He is my lord and lover!"

". . . Or you may stay, if you do not wish to go. It matters not at all."

He rose then, crossed to the bed, stretched out upon it, closed his eyes.

When he looked again, she was gone.

He had seen, however, that which she had not wished him to see.

. . . But I'll not give them anything, he decided. No matter what evidence they offer, I will explain it as a trick. I will keep my knowledge where I keep my feelings, for now.

After a time, he retreated into sleep, dreaming in bright colors of the future as he would have it.

He was left alone for a long while

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after that, which suited him perfectly.

He felt that he had held the Lord of Bats at bay, that he had defeated his first designs upon his sanity. He occasionally chuckled as he paced the walls/ceilings/floors/surfaces of his chamber. He meditated upon his plan and its dangers, on the years that might be involved in achieving it. He ate his meals. He slept.

It occurred to him then that while at any given moment the Lord of Bats might be observing him, he could possibly be under observation at all times. He immediately had visions of the strange gemstone being passed from hand to hand by shifts of his enemy's servitors. The thought persisted. No matter what the action in which he was engaged, there came the nagging feeling that someone might be watching. He took to sitting for long spells glaring at possible watchers behind the mirrors. He would turn suddenly and gesture obscenely at invisible companions.

He slept and awakened to find a drawn bath—his second since his arrival, how many ages ago? —and a fresh costume. He scrubbed himself and donned the green-and-white garb. This time, he let the bells remain above his toes, and he adjusted the cap to a rakish angle.

He seated himself then, clasped his hands behind his head, and smiled faintly. He would not allow his appearance to betray the nervousness he felt.

When the air began to shimmer and he heard the note, he glanced in that direction and nodded slightly.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said the other. "How are you?"

"Quite recovered, I'd say. I should like to be taking my leave soon."

"In matters of health one cannot be too careful. I would say that you still require rest. But we shall discuss that matter at a later time.

"I regret that I have not been able to spend more time with you," he went on. "I have been occupied by matters which required my full attention."

"That is all right," said Jack. "All efforts will shortly come to nothing."

The Lord of Bats studied his face, as though seeking some sign of madness upon it. Then he seated himself. "What do you mean?" he inquired.

Jack turned his left palm upward. "If all things end," he said, "then all efforts will come to nothing."

"Why should all things end?"

"Have you paid heed to the temperature recently, good my Lord?"

"No," said the other, perplexed, "I have not stirred physically from my keep for a long while."

"It might prove instructive for you to do so. Or, better yet, open your being to the emanations from the Shield."

"I shall—in private. But there is always some leakage. The seven

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whose presences are required to dam it will learn of it and act. There is no cause for concern or foreboding."

"There is if one of the seven is confined and unable to respond."

The other's eyes widened.

"I don't believe you," he said.

Jack shrugged.

"I was seeking a safe place from which I might disembark when you offered me your—uh, hospitality. It is certainly easy enough to verify."

"Then why did you not speak of it sooner?"

"Why?" asked Jack. "If my sanity is to be destroyed, what is it to me whether the rest of the world goes on existing or is destroyed?"

"That is a very selfish attitude," said the Lord of Bats.

"It is *my* attitude," said Jack, and he jingled his bells.

"I suppose I must go check your story," sighed the other, rising.

"I'll wait here," said Jack.

The Lord of Bats led him into the high hall that lay beyond the iron door, and there he cut his bonds.

Jack looked about him. There were familiar designs worked in mosaics on the floor, heaps of rushes in the corners, dark hangings upon the walls, a small central altar with a table of instruments beside it, an odor of incense in the air.

Jack took a step forward.

"Your name was strangely entered in the Book of Ells," said the Lord of Bats, "for that of another was blotted out above it."

"Perhaps the tutelary deity had second thoughts on the matter."

"To my knowledge, this has never occurred before. But if you are one of the seven chosen, so be it. Hear me, though, before you move to essay your part of the Shield duty."

He clapped his hands and a hanging stirred. Evene entered the room. She went and stood at her lord's side.

"While your powers may be necessary for this thing," he said to Jack, "do not think that they approach my own here in High Dudgeon. Soon we must strike lights, and there will be shadows. Even if I have underestimated you, know that my lady has had years in which to study the Art and that she is uniquely gifted in its employment. She will add her skills to my own, should you attempt anything save that for which I brought you here. No matter what you believe, she is *not* a simulacrum."

"I know that," said Jack, "for simulacra do not weep."

"When did you see Evene weep?"

"You must ask her about it sometime."

She dropped her eyes as he turned his toward the altar and moved forward.

"I'd best begin. Please stand in the lesser circle," he said.

One by one, he ignited the charcoal within ten braziers which stood in three rows of three, four and three each. He added aromatic

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powders, causing each to flame and cast smokes of different colors. Then he moved to the far side of the altar and traced a pattern upon the floor with the blade of an iron knife. He spoke softly, and his shadow multiplied, recombined into one, swayed, grew still, darkened, then stretched across the hall like an endless roadway to the east. It did not move thereafter, despite the flickering light, and grew so dark that it seemed to possess the quality of depth.

Jack heard the Lord of Bats' whispered words, "I like this not!" to Evene, and he glanced in their direction.

Through the rolling smoke, by the flickering lights, within the circle, he seemed to take on a darker, more sinister appearance and to move with greater and greater assurance and efficiency. When he raised the small bell from the altar and rang it, the Lord of Bats cried, "Stop!" but he did not break the lesser circle as the sense of another presence, tense, watching, filled the hall.

"You are correct with respect to one thing," Jack said. "You are my master when it comes to the Art. I am not so addled as to cross swords with you, yet. Especially not in your place of power. Rather, I seek merely to occupy you for a time, to assure my safety. It will take even the two of you some minutes to banish the force I have summoned here—and then you will have other things to think about. Here's one!"

He seized a leg of the nearest brazier and hurled it across the hall. Its charcoal was scattered among rushes. They began to burn, and flames touched the fringes of a tapestry as Jack continued:

"I have not been summoned for Shield duty. With splinters from the table, charred in the flame of our dinner candle, I altered the entry in the Book of Ells. Its opening unto me was the spell you detected."

"You dared break the Great Compact and tamper with the fate of the world?"

"Just so," said Jack. "The world is of little use to a madman, which is what you would have had me, and I spit on the Compact."

"You are henceforth and forever an outcast, Jack. Count no darksider as friend."

"I never have."

"The Compact and its agent, the Book of Ells, is the one thing we all respect—always have respected—despite all other differences, Jack. You will be hounded now to your ultimate destruction."

"I almost was, here, by you. This way, I am able to bid you good-by."

"I will banish the presence you have summoned and extinguish the fire you have caused. Then I will raise half a world against you. Never again will you know a moment's rest. Your ending will not be a happy one."

"You slew me once; you took my woman and warped her will; you made me your prisoner, wore me around your neck, set your Borshin

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upon me. Know that when we meet again, I will not be the one who is tortured and hounded unto madness. I have a long list, and you head it."

"We will meet again, Shadowjack—perhaps even in a matter of moments. Then you can forget about your list."

"Oh, your mention of lists reminded me of something. Are you not curious as to whose name I effaced when I entered my own into the Book of Ells?"

"What name was it?"

"Strangely enough, it was your name. You should really get out more often, you know. If you had, you might have noticed the chill, inspected the Shield and read in the Book. Then you would have been on Shield duty, and I would not have become your prisoner. All of this unpleasantness could have been avoided. There is a moral there somewhere. Get more exercise and fresh air—that may be it."

"In that case, you would have been the Baron's, or back in Glyve."

"A moot point," said Jack, glancing over his shoulder. "That tapestry is going pretty well now, so I can be moving along. In, say—perhaps a season, perhaps less—who knows? —whenever you finish your Shield duty—you will doubtless seek me. Do not be discouraged if you do not succeed at once. Persist. When I am ready, we will meet. I will take Evene back from you. I will take High Dudgeon away from you. I will destroy your bats. I will see you wander from offal to the grave and back again, many times. Good-by, for now."

He turned away and stared along the length of his shadow.

"I will not be yours, Jack," he heard her say. "Everything I said before was true. I would kill myself before I would be yours."

He breathed deeply of the incensed air, then said, "We'll see," and stepped forward into shadow.

VI

The sky lightened as, sack over shoulder, he trudged steadily eastward. The air was chill and snakes of mist coiled among gray grasses; valleys and gulches were filled with fog; the stars pierced a ghostly film of cloud; breezes from a nearby tarn lapped moistly at the rocky land.

Pausing for a moment, Jack shifted his burden to his right shoulder. He turned and considered the dark land he was leaving. He had come far and he had come quickly. Yet farther must he go. With every step he took toward the light, his enemies' powers to afflict him were lessened. Soon, he would be lost to them. They would continue to seek him, however; they would not forget. Therefore, he did what must be done: he fled. He would miss the dark land, with its witcheries, cruelties, wonders and delights. It held his life, containing as it did the objects of his hatred and his love. He knew that he would have to re-

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turn, bringing with him that which would serve to satisfy both.

Turning, he trudged on.

The shadows had borne him to his cache near Twilight, where he stored the magical documents he had accumulated over the years. He wrapped these carefully and bore them with him into the east. Once he achieved Twilight he would be relatively safe; when he passed beyond it he would be out of danger.

Climbing, he worked his way into the Rennsial Mountains, at the point where the range lay nearest Twilight; there, he sought Panicus, the highest ridge.

Mounting above the mist, he saw the dim and distant form of Morningstar outlined against the ever-dawn. There on his crag, couchant, unmoving, he faced the East. To one who did not know, he would have seemed a wind-sculpted pinnacle atop Panicus. Indeed, he was more than half of stone, his cat-like torso a solid thing joined with the ridge. His wings lay folded flat upon his back, and Jack knew—though he approached him from the rear—that his arms would still be crossed upon his breast, left over right, that the breezes had not disturbed his wire-like hair and beard, that his lidless eyes would still be fixed upon the eastern horizon.

There was no trail, and the last several hundred feet of the ascent required the negotiation of a near-vertical face of stone. As always, for the shadows lay heavy here, Jack strode up it as he would cross a horizontal plane. Before he reached the summit, the winds were screaming about him; but they did not drown out the voice of Morningstar, which rose as from the bowels of the mountain beneath him:

"Good morning, Jack."

He stood beside his left flank and stared high into the air, where Morningstar's head, black as the night he had left, was haloed by a fading cloud.

"Morning?" said Jack.

"Almost. It is always almost morning."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"I have brought you drink."

"I draw water from the clouds and the rain."

"I brought you wine, drawn from the grape."

The great, lightning-scarred visage turned slowly toward him, horns dipping forward. Jack looked away from the unblinking eyes whose color he could never remember. There is something awful about eyes which never see that which they were meant to look upon.

His left hand descended and the scarred palm lay open before Jack. He placed the wineskin upon it. Morningstar raised it, drained it, dropped it at Jack's feet. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, belched lightly, returned his gaze to the East.

"What do you want, Shadow-

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jack?" he asked.

"Of you? Nothing."

"Then why do you bring me wine whenever you pass this way?"

"You seem to like it."

"I do."

"You are perhaps my only friend," said Jack. "You have nothing that I wish to steal. I have nothing that you really need."

"It may be that you pity me, bound as I am to this spot."

"What is pity?" asked Jack.

"Pity is that which bound me here, to await the dawn."

"Then I'll have none of it," said Jack, "for I've a need to move around."

"I know. The one-half world has been informed that you have broken the Compact."

"Do they know why?"

"No."

"Do you?"

"Of course."

"How?"

"From the shape of a cloud I know that a man in a distant city will quarrel with his wife three seasons hence and a murderer be hanged before I finish speaking. From the falling of a stone I know the number of maidens being seduced and the movements of icebergs on the other side of the world. From the texture of the wind I know where next the lightning will fall. So long have I watched and so much am I part of all things, that little is hidden from me."

"You know where I go?"

"Yes."

"And what I would do there?"

"I know that, too."

"Then tell me, if you know, will I succeed in that which I desire?"

"You will succeed in that which you are about, but by then it may not be what you desire."

"I do not understand you, Morningstar."

"I know that, too. But that is the way it is with all oracles, Jack. When that which is foreseen comes to pass, the inquirer is no longer the same person he was when he posed the question. It is impossible to make a man understand what he will become with the passage of time, and it is only a future self to whom a prophecy is truly relevant."

"Fair enough," said Jack. "Only I am not a man. I am a darksider."

"You are all men, whatever side of the world you call home."

"I have no soul, and I do not change."

"You change," said Morningstar. "Everything that lives changes or dies. Your people are cold but their world is warm, endowed as it is with enchantment, glamourie, wonder. The lightlanders know feelings you will not understand, though their science is as cold as your people's hearts. Yet they would appreciate your realm if they did not fear it so, and you might enjoy their feelings but for the same reason. Still, the capacity is there, in each of you. The fear need but give way to understanding, for you are mir-

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ror images of one another. So do not speak to me of souls when you have never seen one, man."

"It is as you said: I do not understand."

Jack seated himself upon a rock and Morningstar stared into the East.

After a time, "You told me that you wait here for the dawn," he said, "to see the sun rise above the horizon."

"Yes."

"I believe that you will wait here forever."

"It is possible."

"Don't you know? I thought you knew all things."

"I know many things, not all things. There is a difference."

"Then tell me some things. I have heard daysiders say that the core of the world is a molten demon; that the temperature increases as one descends toward it; that if the crust of the world be pierced, then fires leap forth and melted minerals, building volcanoes. Yet I know that volcanoes are the doings of fire elementals who, if disturbed, melt the ground about them and hurl it upward. They exist in small pockets. One may descend far past them without the temperature increasing. Traveling far enough, one comes to the center of the world, which is not molten—which contains the machine, with great springs, as in a clock, and gears and pulleys and counterbalances. I know this to be true, for I have journeyed that way and been near to the machine itself. Still, the daysiders have ways of demonstrating that their view is the correct one. I was almost convinced by the way one man explained it, though I knew better. How can this be?"

"You were both correct," said Morningstar. "It is the same thing that you both describe, though neither of you sees it as it really is. Each of you colors reality in keeping with your means of controlling it. But if it is uncontrollable, you fear it. Sometimes then, you color it incomprehensible. In your case, a machine; in theirs, a demon."

"The stars I know to be the houses of spirits and deities—some friendly, some unfriendly, and many not caring. All are near at hand and can be reached. They will respond when properly invoked. Yet the daysiders say that they lie vast distances away and that there is no intelligence there. Again . . .?"

"It is again but two ways of regarding reality, both of them correct."

"If there can be two ways, may there not be a third? Or a fourth? Or as many as there are people, for that matter?"

"Yes," said Morningstar.

"Then which one is correct?"

"They all are."

"But to see it as it *is*, beneath it all! Is this possible?"

Morningstar did not reply.

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"You," said Jack. "Have *you* looked upon reality?"

"I see clouds and falling stones. I feel the wind."

"But by them, somehow, you know other things."

"I do not know everything."

"But have you looked upon reality?"

"I—Once . . . I await the sunrise. That is all."

Jack stared into the East, watching the pink-touched clouds. He listened to falling stones and felt the wind, but there was no wisdom there for him.

"You know where I go and what I would do," he said, after a time. "You know what will happen, and you know what I will be a long while from now. From up here on your mountain you can see all these things. You probably even know when I will die my final death and the manner of its occurrence. You make my life seem futile, my consciousness a thing that is merely along for the ride, unable to influence events."

"No," said Morningstar.

"I feel that you say this only so that I will not be unhappy."

"No, I say it because there are shadows across your life which I cannot pierce."

"Why can't you?"

"It may be that our lives are in some way intertwined. Those things which affect my own existence are always hidden from me."

"That's something, anyway," said Jack.

". . . Or it may be that, obtaining what you seek, you will place yourself beyond predictability."

Jack laughed.

"That would be pleasant," he said.

"Perhaps not so pleasant as you would think."

Jack shrugged.

"Whatever, I have no choice but to wait and see."

Far to his left and below—too far to hear its steady roar—a cataract plunged hundreds of feet and vanished from sight behind a rocky spur. Much farther below, a large stream meandered across a plain and wound its way through a dark forest. Farther still, he could see the smoke that rose above a village on its bank. For a moment, and without knowing why, he longed to walk through it, looking into windows and yards.

"Why is it," he asked, "that the Fallen Star who brought us knowledge of the Art, did not extend it to the daysiders as well?"

"Perhaps," said Morningstar, "the more theologically inclined among the lightlanders ask why he did not grant the boon of science to the darksiders. What difference does it make? I have heard the story that neither was the gift of the Fallen One, but both were the inventions of man; that his gift, rather, was that of consciousness, which creates its own systems."

Uncomfortable, Jack looked away from him. His eyes followed the white, unblinking star which

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had always troubled him, as it moved on its rapid way from right to left in the east.

"The ruler of that star," he said, "has resisted all spells of communication. It moves differently from the others, and faster. It does not twinkle. Why is this?"

"It is not a true star, but an artificial object placed into orbit above Twilight by the dayside scientists."

"To what end?"

"It was placed there to observe the border."

"Why?"

"They fear you."

"We have no designs upon the lands of light."

"I know. But do you not also watch the border, in your own way?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"To be aware of what transpires along it."

"That is all?"

Jack snorted.

"If that object is truly above Twilight, then it will be subject to magic as well as to its own laws. A strong enough spell will affect it. One day, I will knock it down."

"Why?"

"To show that my magic is superior to their science—for one day it will be."

"It would seem unhealthy for either to gain supremacy."

"Not if you are on the side that obtains it."

"Yet you would use their methods to enhance your effectiveness."

"I will employ anything that serves my ends."

"I am curious as to what the result will be, ultimately."

Jack moved to the eastern edge of the pinnacle, swung himself over it, found a foothold, looked upward.

"Well, I cannot wait here with you for the sun to rise. I must go chase it down. Good-by, Morningstar."

"Good morning, Jack."

Like a pedlar, sack upon his shoulder, he trudged toward the light. He moved through the smashed city of Deadfoot, not even glancing at the vine-webbed shrines of the Useless Gods, its most noted tourist attraction. Their altars never bore offerings worth stealing. Wrapping a scarf tightly about his head, he hurried up the famous Avenue of the Singing Statues. Each of these—noted individualists in life—commenced his own song at the sound of a footstep. Finally, running (for it was a long thoroughfare), he emerged with temporary deafness, shortness of breath and a headache.

Lowering his fist, he halted in the middle of a curse, at a loss for words. He could think of no calamity to call down upon the deserted ruin which had not already been visited upon it.

When I rule, things will be different, he decided. Cities will not be planned so chaotically that they come to this.

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Rule?

The thought had come unbidden into his head.

Well, why not? he asked himself. If I can obtain the power I seek, why not use it for everything that is desirable? After I have obtained my vengeance, I will have to come to terms with all those who are against me now. It might as well be as a conqueror. I am the only one who needs no fixed place of power. I shall be able to defeat the others on their own grounds once I hold the Key That Was Lost, Kolwynia. This thought must have been with me all along. I will reward Rosalie for having suggested the means. —And I must add to my list. After I have had my revenge upon the Lord of Bats, Benoni, Smage, Quazer and Blite, I will deal with the Baron and see that the Colonel Who Never Died has cause to change his name.

It amused him that, among others, he bore within his sack those very manuscripts which had aroused the Bat Lord's anger. For a time, he had actually considered the notion of offering to barter them for his freedom. The only reason he had not was the knowledge that the other would either accept and fail to release him, or—what would be worse—would keep the bargain. The necessity of returning stolen goods would be the greatest loss of face he had ever suffered. And this could only be expunged by doing what he was now doing: pursuing the power that would grant him satisfaction. Without the manuscripts, of course, this would be more difficult, and . . .

His head swam. He had been right, he decided, when he had spoken with Morningstar. Consciousness, like the noise of the double-hundred statues of Deadfoot, was a thing of discord and contradiction, giving rise to headaches.

Far to his right, the daysiders' satellite came into view once more. The world brightened as he moved forward. Smudges in distant fields, he saw the first beginnings of green ahead. The clouds burned more brightly in the east. The first bird song he had heard in ages reached his ears, and when he sought out the singer on its bough, he saw bright plumage.

"A good omen," he decided later, "to be met with song."

He stamped out his fire and covered it over, along with the bones and the feathers, before he continued toward day.

VII.

He had felt the beginnings of its slow approach at some point near the middle of the semester. How, he was not certain. In this place, he seemed limited to the same sensory channels as his fellows. Still, groping, turning, hiding, correcting its passage, coming on again, it sought him. He knew that. As to its nature, he had no inkling. Recently, though, at times such as this, he felt that it was drawing near.

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He had walked the eight blocks from the campus to The Dugout, passing high buildings with windows like slots in punch cards, moving along thoroughfares where, despite the passage of years, the exhaust from the traffic still came noxiously to his nostrils; and, turning, he had made his way up streets where beer containers rolled on the sidewalks and garbage spilled from the spaces between buildings. Passive-faced people, by windows, on stairs, in doorways, watched him as he walked. A passenger liner shattered the air high above him; from farther yet, the ever-unmoving sun sought to nail him, shadowless, to the hot pavement. Children at play about an opened fire hydrant had paused at their games to watch him as he went by. Then there had come the false promise of a breeze, the gurgling of the water, the hoarse complaint of a bird beneath some eave. He had tossed his cigarette into the gutter and seen it swept on past him. All this light and I have no shadow, he thought. Strange how nobody's ever noticed. Where, precisely, did I leave it?

In places where lights were dim, there was a change. It seemed to him that a certain quality either came into or departed the world. It was in the nature of an underlying sense of interconnectedness which was not present in day's full glare. With it came small feelings and some impressions. It was as if, despite his deafness to them, the shadows still attempted to address him. It was thus that he knew, upon entering the dark bar, that that which had been seeking him was now drawing near.

The heat of perpetual day dropped away as he moved to the rear of The Dugout. Touched here and there with auburn highlights, he saw her dark hair in the rosy glow of candlelight through glass. Threading his way among tables, he felt relaxed for the first time since he had left his class.

He slid into the booth across from her and smiled.

"Hi, Clara."

She started, her dark eyes widening.

"John! You always do that," she said. "Suddenly you're just—there."

He continued to smile, studying her slightly heavy features, pinch marks where her glasses had been, a small puffiness beneath her eyes, stray strand of hair reaching for her brow.

"Like a salesman," he said. "Here comes the waiter."

"Beer."

"Beer."

They both sighed, leaned back, stared at one another.

Finally, she laughed.

"What a year!" she announced. "Am I glad this semester's over!"

He nodded.

"Largest graduating class yet."

"And the overdue books we'll never see . . ."

"Talk to someone in the front office," he said. "Give them a list of names—"

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"The graduates will ignore billings."

"Someday they'll want transcripts. When they ask, hit them with notices that they won't be sent until they pay their fines."

She leaned forward.

"That's a good idea!"

"Of course. They'll cough up if it means a job to them."

"You missed your calling when you went into anthropology. You should have been an administrator."

"I was where I wanted to be."

"Why do you speak in the past tense?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"What's happened?"

"Nothing, really."

But the feeling was there. It was near.

"Your contract," she said. "Was there some sort of trouble?"

"No," he said. "No trouble."

The drinks arrived. He raised his, sipped it. Beneath the table, his leg brushed against hers as he crossed them. She did not move away, but then, she never did. —From me or anyone else, thought Jack. A good lay, but too eager to get married. She's been impatient with me all semester. Any day now . . .

He dismissed the thoughts. He might have married her had he met her sooner, for he had no qualms about leaving a wife behind when he returned where he must. But he had just met her this semester, and things were close to completion.

"What of the sabbatical you've been mentioning?" she asked. "Any decision on that yet?"

"I don't know. It depends on some research I'm doing right now."

"How far along is it?"

"I'll know after I've used some computer time I have coming."

"Soon?"

He glanced at his wristwatch and nodded.

"*That* soon?" she said. "If the indications are favorable . . .?"

He lit a cigarette.

". . . Then it could be this coming semester," he said.

"But you said that your contract was—"

"—In good order," he said. "But I didn't sign it. Not yet."

"You once told me you thought Quilian doesn't like you."

"He doesn't. He's old-fashioned. He thinks I spend too much time with computers and not enough in libraries."

She smiled.

"So do I."

"At any rate, I'm too popular a lecturer not to be offered a renewal."

"Then why didn't you sign it? Are you asking for more money?"

"No," he said. "But if I do ask for a sabbatical and he refuses, it will be fun to tell him to shove his contract. Not that I wouldn't sign one and walk out, if it would benefit my—research. But I would enjoy telling Doc Quilian where to put his offer."

She sipped her beer.

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"Then you must be near to something important."

He shrugged.

"How did your seminar wind up?" he asked.

She laughed.

"You certainly stick in Professor Weatherton's craw. He devoted most of the lecture to dismembering your Darkside Customs and Philosophies course."

"We disagree on many points, but he's never been darkside."

"He intimated that you haven't either. He agrees that it is a feudal society and that some of its lords may actually believe they possess direct control over everything in their realms. He dismisses the whole notion of their being loosely united in a Compact, though, based on a premise that the sky will fall if they do not maintain some sort of Shield by means of cooperating in magical endeavors."

"Then what keeps everything on that side of the world alive?"

"Somebody asked that question, and he said it was a problem for physical scientists, not social theorists. His personal opinion, though, was that it involved some sort of high altitude bleed-off from our force screens."

He snorted.

"I'd like to take him on a field trip sometime. His buddy Quilian, too."

"I know you've been darkside," she said. "In fact, I think your connection with it is even stronger than you say."

"What do you mean?"

"If you could see yourself now, you would know. It took me a long while to realize what it was, but when I noticed what gave you a strange appearance in places like this, it seemed obvious: it's your eyes. They are more light-sensitive than any eyes I have ever seen before. As soon as you get out of the light and into a place like this, your pupils become enormous. There is only a faint line of color around them. And I noticed that the sunglasses you wear most of the time are far darker than ordinary ones."

"I do have an eye condition. They are quite weak, and bright lights irritate them."

"Yes, that's what I said."

He returned her smile.

He crushed out his cigarette, and as though this were a signal, a soft, sickening music slithered out from a speaker set high on the wall above the bar. He took another drink of beer.

"I suppose Weatherton got in a few shots at the resurrection of bodies, too?"

"Yes."

. . . And I die here? he wondered. What will become of me? Will I be denied Glyve and return?

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Your nostrils flared. Your brows contracted."

"You study features too much. It's that awful music."

"I like looking at you," she said. "But let's finish and go to my place.

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I'll play you something different. There is a thing I want to show you and ask you about, too."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather wait."

"All right."

They finished their drinks, he paid, they departed, his feelings of apprehension subsiding as they moved into the light he filtered.

They climbed the stairs and entered her third-floor apartment. Just over the threshold, she halted and made a small noise in the back of her throat.

He pushed past her, moving quickly to the left. Then he halted.

"What is it?" he asked, searching the room with his eyes.

"I'm sure I didn't leave the place like this. Those papers on the floor . . . I don't think that chair was over there. Or that drawer opened. Or the closet door . . ."

He moved back to her side, studied the lock for scratches, found none. He crossed the room then, and she heard a sound that could only be the clicking of a knife blade as he entered the bedroom.

After a moment he emerged, vanished into the other room, passed from there into the bathroom. When he reappeared, he asked her, "Was that window by the table opened the way it is now?"

"I think so," she said. "Yes, I guess it was."

He sighed. He examined the window sill, then said, "A gust of wind probably blew your papers. As for the drawer and the closet, I'd bet you left them open yourself this morning. And you'd probably forgotten moving the chair."

"I'm a very orderly person," she said, closing the door to the landing; and when she turned, she said, "But I guess you're right."

"Why are you nervous?"

She moved about the apartment, picking up papers.

"Where did you get that knife?" she asked him.

"What knife?"

She slammed the closet door, turned and glared at him.

"The one you had in your hand a minute ago!"

He extended his hands, palms forward.

"I have no knife. You may search me if you wish. You will not find a weapon."

She moved to the chest of drawers, closed the one which had been opened. Stooping, she opened a lower one and removed a newsprint-wrapped parcel.

"This is a part of it," she said. "Why am I nervous? This is why!"

She placed the parcel on the table and undid the strings which held it.

He moved to her side and watched as she unwrapped the papers. Inside were three very old books.

"I thought you'd taken those back already!"

"I intended to—"

"That was the agreement."

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"I want to know where you obtained them, and how."

He shook his head.

"We also agreed that if I were to recover them, you would not ask me those questions."

She placed the books side by side, then pointed at the spine of one and the cover of another.

"I am certain those were not there before," she said. "They are bloodstains, aren't they?"

"I don't know."

"I tried to wipe some of the smaller ones off with a damp tissue. What came off certainly looked like dried blood."

He shrugged.

"When I told you these books had been stolen from their cases in the Rare Books Room and you offered to recover them, I said okay," she continued. "I agreed that if you could get them back, I'd see that it was an anonymous return. No questions. But I never thought this meant bloodshed. The stains alone would not have made me think that that is what happened. But then I began considering you and realized how little I actually know. That's when I began noticing things like your eyes and the quiet way that you move. I had heard that you were friendly with criminals—but then you had written some articles on criminology and were teaching a course on the subject. So it had seemed in order at the time I had heard it. Now I see you move through my rooms with a knife in your hand, presumably ready to kill an intruder. No book is worth a human life. Our agreement is off. Tell me what you did to get them."

"No," he said.

"I must know."

"You staged that scene when we walked in here just to see what I'd do, didn't you?"

She blushed.

Now I suppose she'll try to blackmail me into marrying her, he thought, if she thinks she can make this thing big enough.

"All right," he said, jamming his hands into his pockets and turning to stare out the window. "I found out who did it and had a talk with him. During the misunderstanding that followed, his nose got broken. He had the poor grace to bleed on the books. I couldn't get it all off."

"Oh," he heard her say, and then he turned and studied her face.

"That's all," he said.

He stepped forward then and kissed her. After a moment, she relaxed against him. For a time he massaged her back and shoulders, moved his hands to her buttocks.

Distraction complete, he decided, moving up along her rib cage and inward, slowly, toward the buttons of her blouse.

"I'm sorry," she sighed.

"That's all right," he said, unfastening them. "That's all right."

Later, while staring at a pillow through the curtain of her hair and analyzing his reactions to earlier events, he felt once again the nearing presence, this time so close that it almost seemed as if he were being

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watched. He glanced quickly about the room, saw nothing.

Listening to the sounds of traffic on the street below, he determined to be about his business soon, say, in the space of a cigarette.

There came a sonic boom from overhead that rattled the window like a sudden hand.

Clouds, slowly gathering, obscured the sun somewhat. Knowing he was early, he parked his vehicle in the faculty lot and removed his heavy briefcase from the rear. The trunk of the car contained three heavy traveling bags.

The leaves and grasses had taken on that faint incandescence which sometimes precedes a storm. It was still quite warm, but now the heat was tempered by a light breeze from the north. The campus was almost deserted. He passed a group of students seated about the base of a fountain, comparing notes on an examination they had just taken. He thought he recognized two of them from his Introduction to Cultural Anthropology of several semesters back, but they did not look up as he went by.

As he passed Drake Hall, he heard his name called out.

"John! Doctor Shade!"

Halting, he saw the short, heavy figure of the young instructor Poindexter emerge from the doorway. The man's first name was also John, but since he had been a newcomer to their card group, they had come to refer to him by his last name rather than confuse conversation.

Jack made himself smile as the man approached, and nodded a greeting.

"Hi, Poindexter. I thought you'd be off recuperating by now."

"I still have some damn lab exams to grade," he said, breathing heavily. "I decided I wanted a cup of something hot, and the minute I closed the door to my office I knew what I'd done. The keys are on my desk and the door locks when it closes. There's nobody else in the building and the front office is shut down, too. I was standing there waiting for a guard to come by. I thought they might have access to a master key. Have you seen any guards?"

He shook his head.

"No, I just arrived a few moments ago. But I know the guards don't have access to masters. —Your office is on the far side of the building, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I forget how high off the ground that would put it, but what about getting in through a window?"

"Too high, without a ladder—and they're both locked, anyhow."

"Let's go inside."

Poindexter ran the back of his hand across his ruddy forehead and nodded.

Entering and moving to the rear of the building, Jack removed a ring of keys and oddly shaped pieces of metal from his pocket and fitted one into the lock of the door Poindexter indicated. It turned, there

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was a click, and he pushed the door open.

"Lucky," he said.

"Where'd you get a master?"

"It's not a master, it's the key to my office. That's why you're lucky."

Poindexter's face opened into a yellowish smile.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot. Are you in a hurry?"

"No, I'm early for what I was about."

"Then let me get us something from the machine. I still want to take a break."

"All right."

He moved into the office, placed his briefcase behind the door, while the other's footsteps receded, were gone.

He stared out the window at the gathering storm. Somewhere a bell began to ring.

After a time, Poindexter returned, and he accepted the steaming cup he proffered.

They sipped at their cups, then, "It *is* lucky you came along," Poindexter said. "Maybe ours are the only two offices on campus with the same lock. Hell, I would have settled for the ghost if he'd gotten me in."

"Ghost?"

"You know. The latest stunt."

"I'm afraid I haven't heard of it."

". . . A white thing, allegedly seen flitting around in trees and on the tops of buildings."

"When did this start?"

"Just recently, of course. Last semester it was mutagenic rocks in the geology building. The one before that, I think, it was aphrodisiacs in the water coolers. Same as always. A semester closes like the end of the world, I guess, full of portents and rumors. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Have a cigarette."

"Thanks."

He heard a tiny bleat of thunder, and the ever-present odor from the laboratories aroused unpleasant memories. That's why I never liked this building, he realized. It's the smells.

"Will you be with us this coming semester?" Poindexter asked.

"I think not."

"Oh, you got your leave approved. Congratulations!"

"Not exactly."

A look of concern flashed at him through thick glasses.

"You're not quitting, are you?"

"It depends—on several things."

"If I may be selfish about it, I hope you decide to stay."

"Thanks."

"You'll keep in touch, though, if you do go?"

"Of course."

A weapon, he decided. I need something better than what I've got. But I can't ask him. It's good that I stopped in here, though.

He drew on his cigarette, glanced out the window. The sky had continued to darken; there appeared to be some moisture on the pane.

He gulped and dropped his cup into the wastebasket. Mashing out

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his cigarette, he stood.

"I'd better run if I'm going to make it to Walker before it starts to come down."

Poindexter stood and shook his hand.

"Well, if I don't see you again for a while, good luck," he said.

"Thanks. —The keys."

"What?"

"The keys. Why don't you take them off the desk and put them in your pocket now, just in case?"

Poindexter blushed and did it. Then he chuckled.

"Yes. I wouldn't want to do that again, would I?"

"I hope not."

He retrieved his briefcase while Poindexter lit the candles above his desk. There came a flash in the sky, followed by a low rumble.

"So long."

"Good-by."

He departed and hurried to the Walker Building, pausing only to break into a laboratory and steal a bottle of sulfuric acid, taping the stopper in place.

VIII.

He tore out the first pages of the print-out and spread them on the table he had appropriated. The unit continued its clicking, drowning out the sounds of the rain.

He returned to the machine, tore out the next page. He placed it beside the others and regarded them.

There came a sound like scratching from the direction of the window, and he jerked his head upright, nostrils dilated.

Nothing. There was nothing there.

He lit a cigarette and dropped the match on the floor. He paced. He checked his wristwatch. A candle flickered above its sconce and the wax slid down its side. He moved to the window and listened to the wind.

There came a click from the door and he turned and faced it. A large man entered the room and regarded him. He removed a dark rain hat, placed it on the chair beside the door, ran a hand through his thin, white hair.

"Doctor Shade," he said, nodding and unbuttoning his coat.

"Doctor Quilian."

The man hung his coat beside the door, produced a handkerchief, and began wiping his glasses.

"How are you?"

"Fine, thank you. Yourself?"

"Fine."

Doctor Quilian closed the door, and the other returned to the machine, tore out more pages.

"What are you doing?"

"Some figuring for that paper I told you about—a couple weeks ago, I guess."

"I see. I just recently learned about your arrangement here." He gestured toward the machine. "Whenever anyone cancels out, you're right there to take over his computer time."

"Yes. I keep in touch with everyone on the roster."

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"There have been an awful lot of cancellations recently."

"I think it's the flu."

"I see."

He drew on his cigarette. He dropped it and stepped on it when the machine stopped printing. Turning, he removed the final print-outs. He took them to the table where the others lay.

Doctor Quilian followed him.

"May I see what you've got there?" he inquired.

"Surely," he said and offered him the papers.

After a moment, "I don't understand them," said Quilian.

"If you had, I would have been very surprised. They're about three times removed from reality, and I'll have to translate them for my article."

"John," said the other, "I'm beginning to have some funny feelings about you."

The other nodded and lit another cigarette before he recovered the print-outs.

"If you want the computer yourself, I'm finished now," he said.

"I've been thinking a lot about you. How long have you been with us?"

"Around five years."

There came a sound from the window once more, and they both turned their heads.

"What was that?"

"I don't know."

After a time, "You get to do pretty much what you want to around here, John . . ." said Quilian, adjusting his glasses.

"That's true. I appreciate it."

"You came to us with good-seeming credentials, and you've proven to be quite expert on darkside culture."

"Thank you."

"I didn't exactly mean it as a compliment."

"Oh, really?" He began to smile as he studied the final page of the print-out. "What *do* you mean?"

"I've got a strange feeling you've misrepresented yourself, John."

"In what way?"

"On your application for a position here, you stated that you were born in New Leyden. There is no record of your birth in that city."

"Oh? How did this come to light?"

"Doctor Weatherton was up that way recently."

"I see. Is that all?"

"Outside of the fact that you are known to keep company with hoodlums, there is some doubt as to the validity of your degree."

"Weatherton again?"

"The source is unimportant. The conclusion is not. I do not feel that you are what you purport to be."

"Why choose tonight, here, to air your doubts?"

"The semester's over; I know that you want to go away, and tonight was your last session with the machine—according to the time you applied for. I want to know what you are taking away with you and where you are taking it."

"Carl," he said, "what if I admit-

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ted that I did misrepresent myself a bit? You've already stated I'm an expert in my area. We both know I'm a popular lecturer. Whatever Weatherton dug up—What of it?"

"Are you in some kind of trouble, Jack? Something I might be able to help you with?"

"No. Not really. No trouble."

Quilian crossed the room and seated himself on a low couch.

"I've never seen one of you this close before," he said.

"What are you implying?"

"That you are something other than a human being."

"Like what?"

"A darkborn. Are you?"

"Why?"

"They are supposed to be taken into custody, under certain conditions."

"I take it that if I am, those conditions will be deemed to have been met?"

"Perhaps," said Quilian.

"And perhaps not? What do you want?"

"For now, all that I want is to know your identity."

"You know me," he said, folding the pages and reaching for his briefcase.

Quilian shook his head and stood.

"Of the things about you which trouble me," he said, "I've just recently found a new one which gives me considerable cause for concern. Allowing for a moment that you are a darksider who has emigrated into day, there are certain correspondences which force me to pursue the question of your identity. There is a person who I had considered possessed only a mythological existence, on the dark side of the world. I wonder, would the legendary thief dare to walk in sunlight? And if so, for what reason? Could Jonathan Shade be the mortal equivalent for Jack of Shadows?"

"And what if it is?" he asked, striving to keep his eyes from moving to the window, where something seemed now to be occluding much of the dim light.

"Are you prepared to place me under arrest?" he asked, moving slowly to his left so that Quilian would turn his head to follow.

"Yes, I am."

He glanced toward the window himself then, and an old loathing returned to him as he saw what was pressed against it.

"Then I take it that you have come armed?"

"Yes," he said, removing a small pistol from his pocket and pointing it.

I could throw the briefcase and risk taking one round, he decided. After all, it's a small enough weapon. Still, if I buy time and get closer to the light, it may not be necessary.

"It is strange that you came alone, if you had such a thing in mind. Even if you do have the authority to make a security arrest on campus—"

"I did not say that I am alone."

"—Not really strange, though, now that I think of it." He took a

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step nearer the flickering light. "I say that you are alone. You would like to handle this yourself. It may simply be that you wish to kill me without witnesses. Or it may be that you desire full credit for my apprehension. I'd guess the former, though, because you seem to dislike me very much. Why, I'm not certain."

"I fear that you overestimate your ability to create a disliking, as well as my own for violence. —No, the authorities have been notified and an arresting party is on its way here. My intention is only to require your presence until they arrive."

"It would seem that you waited until about the last possible moment."

With his free hand, Quilian gestured toward the briefcase.

"I've a suspicion that once your latest project has been deciphered, it will be found to have little to do with the social sciences."

"You are a very suspicious person. There are laws against arresting people without evidence, you know."

"Yes, that's why I waited. I'm betting that's evidence that you are holding—and I am certain that more will turn up. I have noted, too, that when it comes to matters of security, the laws are considerably relaxed."

"You do have a point there," he replied, turning so that the light caught him full in the face.

"I am Jack of Shadows!" he cried out. "Lord of Shadow Guard! I am Shadowjack, the thief who walks in silence and in shadows! I was beheaded in Iglés and rose again from the Dung Pits of Glyve. I drank the blood of a vampire and ate a stone. I am the breaker of the Compact. I am he who forged a name in the Red Book of Ells. I am the prisoner in the jewel. I duped the Lord of High Dudgeon once, and I will return for vengeance upon him. I am the enemy of my enemies. Come take me, filth, if you love the Lord of Bats or despise me, for I have named myself Jack of Shadows!"

Quilian's face showed puzzlement at this outburst, and though he opened his mouth and tried to speak, his words were drowned out by the other's cries.

Then the window shattered, the candle died, and the Borshin sprang into the room.

(To be concluded next month)

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Gene Wolfe's new story is about Lenor Stacy, who seldom looked into mirrors, who often spoke to no one at all from Friday afternoon to Monday morning, who, at thirty-three, went looking for a female Abominable Snowman.

Sweet Forest Maid

by GENE WOLFE

AT THIRTY-THREE LENOR STACY gave up her apartment, sold her furniture and most of her clothes, walked away from her job, and went looking for the Adorable Woods Woman.

But of course there was a great deal more to it than that. If she had lived fifty years earlier, Lenor's friends would have said she had been disappointed by Love, and been half right. Today no one says such things—perhaps partly because women like Lenor no longer have friends; the old ties, the duty of the friends of one's mother and sisters (Lenor had none) to be one's own friends too, having broken down.

Lenor, then, had been disappointed by Love. She had (afterward) been disappointed by hate as well, and the experience had drained her for thirteen years, leaving her a woman—a tastefully, an inexpensively, a sometimes not very neatly dressed woman—happy to arrive at her desk early every weekday morning and more than content to remain half an hour late when any reason to do so could be contrived. *They said, "She runs the place," and she knew and enjoyed it and despised them because it was true; you know her.* In the evening she watched TV or read, and only weekends, during the thirteen years, presented her with real difficulties.

She went to movies, exercised at a health spa (it had been a supermarket), drove, attended concerts and art exhibitions, and often spoke to no one at all from Friday afternoon to Monday morning. She was sometimes bored, but seldom unhappy. In a way she was tired. At no time did she show interest in hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, or any of the other woodsy pastimes that have sprung up like mushrooms on the dead roots of nature.

The Woods Woman was a black figure in a magazine, a black figurine set in a Kodachrome forest.

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The man who had taken her picture thought she was a female Abominable Snowman (*yeti* or *metoh kangmi*, the American Sasquatch, Big Foot, or "Stinking One"—and may *Gitche-Manitou* help you, paleface) and called her the Adorable Woods Woman in the hope that this appealing title would dissuade other lovers of the outdoors from shooting her. She was a fraud in a fur suit, an ape escaped, a bear, an animal, a last-surviving *Gigantopithecus*, a myth photographed, a troll woman. Imagine, if you will, a great strapping girl (Lenor was tall herself), a girl heavy-hipped, pendulously bosomed. Cover this girl with hair as thick and black as a spaniel's; give her the head of a gorilla.

No (as Lenor said to herself), you did it wrong.

That thing in your mind is not a gorilla's face. You think words, and the things behind the words change until they are no longer what they were. That stupid mask in your mind is fantasy, the bad, uncaring joke of some Hollywood prop man. She went to a zoo and watched a real gorilla, watched (she was standing behind children and drinking Coca Cola through a straw) until the ugly prop-man goblin mask faded from her mind and she knew that wise, sad look.

There either was, or was not, a woman (girl?) in a forest in California who looked like that. If there were, she—and her parents, presumably, brothers, sisters, and incredible swain or swains—lived still as people had before those preposterous inventions fire and the stone-tipped spear, save that to all the other burdens of their lives were added deadly fear of that race of stunted, pallid elves who hemmed their world with magic. Lived by eating grubs and seeds. Shivering in rain and exulting in the sun; waiting for Eden to reopen.

And well why not?

And a week later, *why not do something—just once?*

She knew nothing about photography, but she bought a medium-priced Japanese camera and read the booklet that she found in the box. Then she took pictures in the park until she had learned to judge distance and light.

The camping equipment that the sporting goods stores offered repelled her. It seemed a crime to think of taking that costly, bright, durable, gimmicky stuff under trees; besides, it would be too heavy to carry, and she knew she would find nothing close to the road. In the end she bought a pair of tennis shoes because they reminded her of the ones she had worn to gym in high school, and took an old blanket to sleep in and a plastic drop cloth she had acquired when she repainted her apartment. The drop cloth would keep out the damp when she slept on the ground and, if it rained, could be made into some sort of shelter. She kept her

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underwear, some sweaters and blouses, three pairs of slacks, and an old car coat; she sold or gave away the rest of her clothes. *I'll buy all new,* she thought, *when I come back. I'll have such fun.* She did not look in the mirror (there was only one mirror now in her apartment, in the bathroom) as she said this, but then she seldom, now, looked into mirrors; lipstick was, now, her only cosmetic, and she had learned to apply it using the very small one in her compact, in which she saw her lips only.

The Klamath Forest of northern California is seldom named on maps, though it covers more than 2500 square miles. Mapmakers, it seems, do not like to give the names of forests because it is so difficult to show their bounds; they have no hard edges. Lenor, despite them, driving along State Route 96 between the little town of Happy Camp (where are you, Bret Harte?) and the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, knew that the Klamath lay south and east of her. And that the likely spots—the places where the crowding trees could be penetrated with little trouble, where the ground was for walking instead of climbing, or where some timbering operation had built a road—would be no good. She stopped her car at a place that looked very bad instead, got out and forced her way in. As simple as that.

The Klamath Forest grows on the Klamath Range, geologically one of the oldest mountain massifs in North America. The Klamaths have seen glaciers come and go, and remember dire wolves as big as ponies beneath their trees; they are no longer tall and proud like the young Rockies, but they are very, very rough.

All up and down like an Irish wind; water courses that go nowhere, sinking into dead pools. Others dropping a hundred feet in half a mile, roaring over rocks. There are dry folds in the Klamaths, too, and deep, silent crevasses which it is better not to clamber down into.

Lenor made her way into this country for two days. A man would have told her it was no place for a woman, and in half a day he would have decided it was no place for a man either, and gone back. A man would have tried to carry enough food for three large meals a day. Lenor took tea and matches and some hard baking chocolate, a box of dried figs, sugar, and a small pan. She expected to lose weight, had fasted before (though she called it dieting), and suffered no neurotic doubts about her strength of today as compared to her strength of yesterday. At the end of the second day she found a spot more open than most (though no spot in the Klamath Forest is very open) and so nearly level that after what she had been scrambling across for the last thirty-six hours it seemed actually

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flat. (Though no land in the Klamaths is really flat.) A faint game trail led to a stream, and she built a screen of brush there to hide behind, something she did not call a blind because she did not think in such terms. When it was finished, she settled down with her camera to wait; not smoking, moving no more than necessary, listening to the birds and the wind.

After three days she had seen several rabbits, three grey foxes, a raccoon, and a doe—whose picture she had snapped in order to have something to remember the experience by. She called herself a fool and decided it was time to go home.

She "went home" for three more days without striking the road on which she had left her car, and at the end of the third day she was in an area she was certain she had never seen before. The figs and the chocolate were gone, and the sugar almost gone. She ate a handful of insipid berries and some crayfish that she cleaned with a nail file and boiled. She knew, or thought she knew, the direction in which the road lay; but the country would not allow her to go that way, forcing her off at right angles time after time.

On the fourth day (the seventh since she had left her car) it rained. She made a lean-to of her drop cloth and spent the day sleeping and brewing tea over a tiny fire kindled of wood that she had managed to get under cover before it was wet down too badly. When she wrapped herself in her blanket that evening, it was still raining.

The fever came in the night and woke her. There was nothing to hear but the patter of the rain, but she felt the hot flush creeping from her face and ears all down her body. She thought: *I'm going to be very sick.* Then she dropped back to sleep.

She was sick the next day with fever and a deep, rattling cough. It was still raining, but it might rain for a week, and she could not wait a week. She put the blanket and the drop cloth over her head like outsized shawls and went as far as she could before stopping to rest under an outcrop. Then it was morning again, without any night that she could recall between the sun and birds and the dripping afternoon of the preceding day. She tried to stand and found that she had to pull herself erect, holding on to the rocks—while somewhere a stone slid on a stone.

She froze, then let herself sink down again, perversely glad at the recess of effort. Feet shuffled. *A bear,* she thought. *A bear.* And flattened herself against the rocks. Whatever it was, it was just out of sight, only just hidden by the angle of the rocky wall. She drew her shawls around her and heard it come nearer. Then, as she watched, a hand reached forth to pinch up a scuttling insect two yards from where she crouched. The fingers

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were matted with hair, the nails filthy and broken, but it was a human hand. *They are people after all,* she thought, and stepped out, slowly (so as not to frighten the creature, but then she could only move, now, slowly), until she could see the girl's frightened, deep eyes. *Perhaps they'll help me,* she thought, and then discovered she did not know what to say.

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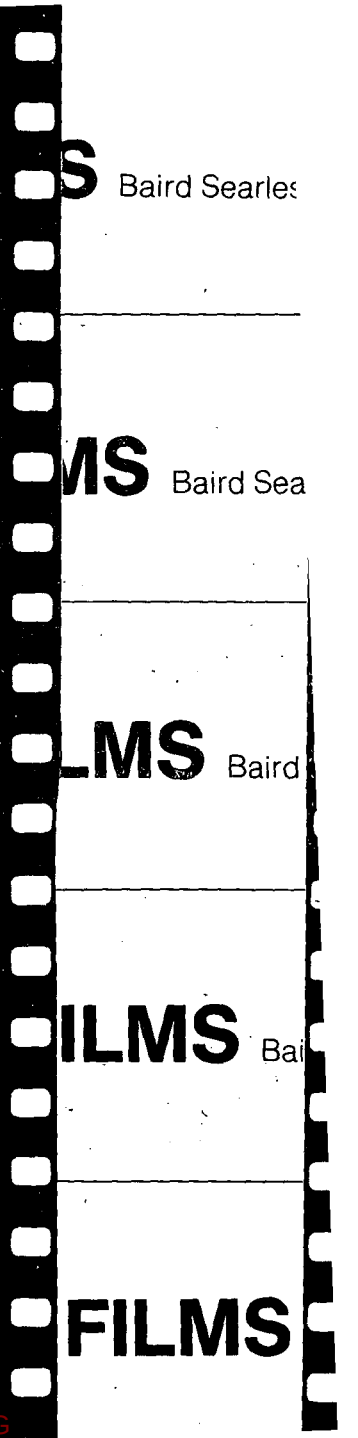

OK, GENTLE READERS, IT'S TIME FOR A SHORT lecture on film and literature, occasioned by **THX 1138** (Warners'). I said in my last column that *The Andromeda Strain* would have to do us until Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* came along. *THX 1138* is a good deal more than that. Since critics' screenings were close upon the film's opening, I'm afraid this notice is too late to alert you in advance. But if you missed *THX 1138*, you blew it.

But about that lecture. To say what I feel about *THX*, I'm going to have to go into some pretty basic stuff about media. I'm sure half the readers will immediately say, "Oh, no, not again" and continue only with an effort. But it has to be said again and again and again . . . *A movie is not a book. Film is not print. Cinema is not literature* . . . until the other half get it into their heads and stop judging the one by the other. I was never more taken aback in my life than by the reaction of many s-f people to *2001* (primarily the old guard), and it took me a while to realize why they were so negative. They were indoctrinated to being *told* things, not *shown* things. And *2001* as a literary experience doesn't add up to much. But as a cinematic experience, it is, of course, a masterpiece.

Science fiction, as literature, has become a very sophisticated medium, with unique ideas and premises that need some background in the field for comprehension (ftl travel, c-t matter, etc.). SF as film, on the other hand, has been fairly primitive, since so many of its more advanced concepts were expressible only in words. Most s-f films were done on a literary base, i.e. a conventional story with plot, dialogue, climax, etc. As films they weren't much good, and as stories they weren't much good, especially to s-f people who had gone beyond that which was, per-

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force, geared to a mass market. The few good things along the way were peripheral—and basically *filmic*. The effects of *Forbidden Planet*, the charm of Robby, the Robot, the menace of the footprints with no visible source—all these were possible only in film and would be flat if written about. The horrifying vastness and gloom of the ordinary cellar in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* came across on film with immensely more impact than in the novel.

But cinema itself has become an extremely sophisticated medium; it has outgrown the literary mold of its first half century. And finally those filmmakers have come to science fiction as source material. *2001* made the breakthrough; *THX 1138* continues the tradition. The unfortunate thing about movie reviewing is that it has to be done in words. And in words, *THX* breaks down to not much. Automated society, population kept in control by drugs and robot police, sex illegal, high consumerism necessary. Maverick stops taking drugs, makes love to his wife, is put away, escapes, is chased through claustrophobic city, escapes up ladder to the surface to face . . .

It is, as usual, the style that makes it. We are introduced to the characters, the society, the situation, in fragmentary images that only gradually take on meaning. Much of what we see is as purposefully meaningless as a computer lab to a Renaissance man. The sound-track is a constant garble of half heard recorded messages, and the look of everything is primarily white on white (though the film is in color), the white coveralls of the people fading into the sterile whiteness of the corridors and cubicles. There's not much point in trying to describe it; it is, after all, a *film*.

A chrome robot policeman and a human inhabitant of the 25th century world of THX 1138.

However, I can put into words that credit is due almost everyone that has to do with this film, especially writer-director George Lucas, and stars Donald Pleasance and Robert Duvall in the title role. And apologies for lecturing . . . to those readers who didn't need it.

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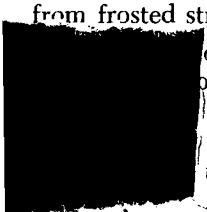
About the theory of multiple world lines—in which whenever a decision is made the world becomes two or more worlds, one for each way the decision can go—and what happens when the world lines merge . . .

For A Foggy Night

by LARRY NIVEN

THE BAR WAS SELLING A LOT OF Irish coffee that night. I'd bought two myself. It was warm inside, almost too warm, except when some one pushed through the door. Then a puff of chill, damp fog would roll in.

Beyond the window was grey chaos. The fog picked up all the various city lights: yellow light leaking from inside the bar, passing automobile headlights, white light from frosted street globes, and the



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destrian's pace. Cars. I felt sorry for the drivers. Rolling through a grey formless limbo, running from street globe to invisible street globe, alert for the abrupt, dangerous red dot of a traffic light: an intersection; you couldn't tell otherwise . . . I had friends in San Francisco; there were other places I could be. But it wasn't my city, and I was damned if I'd drive tonight.

A lost night. I'd finished my drink. One more, and I'd cross the street to my hotel.

"You'd best wait until the fog thins out," said the man next to me.

He was a stranger, medium all over; medium height and weight, regular features, manicured nails, feathery brown hair, no scars. The invisible man. I'd never have looked his way if he hadn't spoken. But he was smiling as if he knew me.

I said, "Sorry?"

"The point is, your hotel might not be there when you've crossed the street. Don't be surprised," he added. "I can read minds. We've learned the knack, where I come from."

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There are easy ways to interrupt a conversation with a stranger. A blank stare will do it. But I was bored and alone, and a wacky conversation might be just what I needed.

I said, "Why shouldn't my hotel be exactly where I left it?"

He frowned into his Scotch and soda, then took a swallow. "Do you know the theory of multiple world lines? It seems that whenever a decision is made, it's made both ways. The world becomes two or more worlds, one for each way the decision can go. Ah, I see you know of it. Well, sometimes the world lines merge again."

"But—"

"That's exactly right. The world must split on the order of a trillion times a second. What's so unbelievable about that? If you want a real laugh, ask a physicist about fur-coated particles."

"But you're saying it's *real*. Every time I get a haircut—"

"One of you waits until tomorrow," said the brown-haired man. "One of you keeps the sideburns. One gets a manicure, one cuts his own nails. The size of the tip varies too. Each of you is as real as the next, and each belongs to a different world line. It wouldn't matter if the world lines didn't merge every so often."

"Uh huh." I grinned at him. "What about my hotel?"

"I'll show you. Look through that window. See the street lamp?"

"Vaguely."

"You bet, vaguely. San Francisco is a town with an active history. The world lines are constantly merging. What you're looking at is the probability of a street lamp being in a particular place. Looks like a big fuzzy ball, doesn't it? That's the locus of points where a bulb might be—or a gas flame. Greatest probability density is in the center, where it shows brightest."

"I don't get it."

"When the world lines merge, everything blurs. The further away something is, the more blurred it looks. I shouldn't say *looks*, because the blurring is real; it's no illusion. Can you see your hotel from here?"

I looked out the appropriate window, and I couldn't. Two hours ago I'd nearly lost my way just crossing the street. Tonight a man could lose himself in any city street, and wander blindly in circles in hopes of finding a curb. . . .

"You see? Your hotel's too far away. In the chaos out there, the probability of your h[redacted] where specific is to[redacted] Vanishingly small. [redacted] make it."

Something about [redacted] talked. . . .

"I wondered when you'd notice that." He smiled, as if we shared a secret.

"All this time," I said, "I've been thinking that you talk just like everyone else. But you don't. It's not

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just the trace of accent. Other people don't say *probability density* or *theorem of multiple world lines* or *on the order of.*"

"No, they don't."

"Then we must both be mathematicians!" I smiled back at him.

"No," he said.

"But then—" But I backed away from the problem, or from the answer. "My glass is empty. Could you use a refill?"

"Thanks, I could."

I fixed it with the bartender. "Funny thing," I told the brown-haired man. "I always thought the blurring effect of fog came from water droplets in the air."

"Bosh," he said. "Bosh and tish. The water's there, all right, whenever the fog rolls in. I can't explain it. The condensation must be a side effect from the blurring of the world lines. But that's not interfering with your vision. Water's transparent."

"Of course. How could I have forgotten that?"

"I forgot it myself, a long time ago." The Scotch was beginning to reach him, I think. He had an accent, and it was growing stronger. "That's why I'm here. That's why I stopped you. Because you'd remember."

The bartender brought us our drinks. His big shoulders were hunched inward against the damp grey light that seeped in the windows.

I sipped at the burning hot glass. Irish whiskey and strong black coffee poured warmth through me, to counteract the cold beyond the walls. A customer departed, and the fog swirled and swallowed him.

"I walked into the fog one afternoon," said the brown-haired man. "The fog was thick, like tonight. A cubic mile of cotton, as we say. I was just going out for a pouch of snuff. When I reached the tobacconist's, he tried to sell me a bundle of brown paper sticks with a Spanish trademark."

"Uh huh. What did you do?"

"Tried to get home, of course. Things changed oddly while I wandered in the fog. When it cleared and left me stranded, even my money was no good. The worst of it was that I couldn't even tell my story. Nobody could read my mind to see that I was sane. It was find another fog bank or try to make a life for myself."

"With no money?"

"Oh, I sold my ring and found a poker game."

"Oh. *Oh!*"

"That was a year ago. It's worked out well enough. I thought I might invent something, like the zipper, but that fell through. You're far ahead of us in the physical sciences. But money's no problem. Sometimes there's a fixed horse race. Sometimes I find a poker game, or a crooked crap game where they'll let me bet the right way."

"Sounds great." But not very honest, I thought.

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"You disapprove?" My companion's voice had suddenly gone thin and cold.

"I didn't say that."

"I compensate for what I take," the brown-haired man said angrily. "I know how to untwist a sick man's mind. If a player sits down with emotional problems, I can help him. If he really needs the money, I can see that it comes to him."

"Why don't you become a psychiatrist?"

He shook his head. "It would take years, and then I'd never be able to hold a patient long enough to do myself any good. He'd get well too fast. Besides that, I *hate* certain people: I'd want to harm them instead of helping them.

"Anyway, I don't go out in the fog any more. I like it here. I stopped you because you're one of those who remember."

"You said that before. What exactly—?"

"After all, people are constantly walking into fogs. Why is it that we don't hear more about people wandering in from alternate world lines? It's because their memories adjust."

"Ah."

"I caught it happening once. A girl from somewhere else . . . I didn't catch the details; they faded too fast. I got her a job as a go-go dancer. I think she was a prize concubine in someone's harem before she ran into the fog.

"Their memories adjust. They forget their friends, their relatives, their husbands and wives in the old world line. They remember what man is king or president or chairman in the new. But not us. You and I are different. I can recognize the rare ones."

"Because you can read minds." Sarcastically. Part of me still disbelieved; yet . . . it fit too well. The brown-haired man talked like a mathematics professor because he was talking to me, and I was a mathematics professor, and he was reading my mind.

He looked thoughtfully into his glass. "It's funny, how many sense the truth. They won't walk or drive in the fog if they can help it. At the bottom of their minds, they know that they might return home to find a Romish camp, or a Druidic dancing ground, or the center of a city, or a sand dune. You knew it yourself. The top of your mind thinks I'm an entertaining liar. The deepest part of you knew it all before I spoke."

"I just don't like fog," I said. I looked out the window, toward my hotel, which was just across the street. I saw only wet chaos and a swirling motion.

"Wait until it clears."

"Maybe I will. Refill?"

"Thanks."

Somehow I found myself doing most of the talking. The brown-haired man listened, nodded occa-

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sionally, asked occasional questions.

We did not mention fog.

"I need an ordered universe," I said at one point. "Why else would I have studied math? There's never an ambiguity in mathematics."

"Whereas in interpersonal relationships . . ."

"Yes! Exactly!"

"But mathematics is a game. Abstract mathematics doesn't connect with the real universe except by coincidence or convenience. Like the imaginary number system: it's used in circuit design, but it certainly wasn't intended for that."

"No, of course not."

"So that's why you never got married?"

"Right," I said sadly. "Ordered universe. Hey, I never knew that. Did I?"

"No."

The fog cleared about one o'clock. My brown-haired friend accompanied me out.

"Mathematics doesn't fit reality," he was saying. "No more than a game of bridge. The real universe is chaotic."

"Like in-ter-personal re-lationships."

"Maybe you'll find them easier now."

"Like fog. Well, maybe I will. I know some new things about myself . . . where's my hotel?"

There was no hotel across the street.

Suddenly I was cold sober, and cold scared.

"So," said my drinking partner. "You must have lost it earlier. Was it foggy when you crossed the street?"

"Thick as paste. Oh, brother. Now what do I do?"

"I think the fog's starting to roll in again. Why not wait? The bar won't close until four."

"They close at two in my world." *In my world.* When I admitted that, I made it real.

"Then maybe you should stay in this one. At least the bartender took your money. Which reminds me. Here." He handed me my wallet.

He must have picked my pocket earlier. "For services rendered," he said. "But it looks like you'll need the money."

I was too worried to be angry. "My money passes, but my checks won't. I've got half a term of teaching to finish at Berkeley . . . and tenure, dammit! I've got to get back."

"I'm going to run for it," said the brown-haired man. "Try the fog if you like. You might find your way home." And off he went, running to beat the fog. It was drifting in in grey tendrils as I went back into the bar.

An hour later the fog was a cubic mile of cotton, as they say. I walked into it.

I intended to circle the block where I had left my hotel. But there was no way to get my bearings, and the outlines of the block would not hold still. Sight was gone, sound

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was strangely altered and muffled. I walked blind and half deaf, with my arms outstretched to protect my face, treading lightly for fear of being tripped.

One thing, at least, the brown-haired man had failed to warn me about. I walked up to a pedestrian-sized grey blur to ask directions, and when I reached it, it wasn't human. It watched me dispassionately as I sidled off.

I might have drifted away from the area. The hotel varied from an ancient barrow to a hot springs (I smelled warm, pungent steam) to a glass-sided skyscraper to a vertical slab of black basalt to an enormous pit with red-glowing rock at the bottom. It never became a hotel.

The mist was turning white with dawn. I heard something coming near: the putt-putt-putt of a motor scooter, but distorted. Distorted to the clop-clop-clop of a horse's hooves . . . and still approaching. It became a pad-pad-pad-pad, the sound of something heavy and cat-like. I stood frozen. . . .

The fog blew clear, and the sound was two sets of footsteps, two oddly dressed men walking toward me. It was dawn, and the fog was gone, and I was stranded.

In eerie silence the men took me by the elbows, turned me about, and walked me into the building which had been my hotel. It had become a kind of hospital.

At first it was very bad. The attendants spoke an artificial language, very simple and unambiguous, like deaf-mute sign language. Until I learned it, I thought I had been booked into a mental hospital.

It was a retraining center for people who can't read minds.

I was inside for a month, and then an outpatient for another six. Quick progress, they say; but then, I hadn't suffered organic brain damage. Most patients are there because of damage to the right parietal lobe.

It was no trouble to pay the hospital fees. I hold patents on the pressure spray can and the butane lighter. Now I'm trying to design a stapler.

And when the fog is a cubic mile of cotton, as we say, I stay put until it goes away.

Coming soon

Lots of good things on hand, including funny stories by **Ben Bova, Ron Goulart;** frightening ones by **Kit Reed, A. Bertram Chandler;** all will be along within the next month or two. And, of course, next month concludes JACK OF SHADOWS by **Roger Zelazny.** The August issue is on sale July 1; or why not join us regularly by sending the coupon on page 110.

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BOOKS

IT'S SAID THAT CLARK ASHTON SMITH MAY have met Ambrose Bierce in the Bohemian San Francisco of the early nineteen hundreds. Of course Smith would have been very young, and Bierce getting on to be remarkably sour, neither of them really at their best, but the confrontation would have been intriguing all the same. Few authors held less hope for our species than these two, or considered it less important in the general scheme of things.

The vast difference between them was that Bierce's understanding of man's sublime futility infuriated him and made him bitter, whereas Smith's clear vision of it braced and cheered him and spurred him on to endless, lively speculations on the awesome possibilities of impartial disaster. It isn't surprising to learn that he veered toward Buddhism in his later years, since one of the basic paradoxes of that orientation is that we should take heart, as all is hopeless. There are, in fact, many qualities about Smith visible in his photographs—a gentleness, a distance not at all aloof, a strange tranquillity and a dignity—which strongly call to mind the conventional

OTHER DIMENSIONS, Clark Ashton Smith, Arkham House, $6.50

ZOTHIQUE, Clark Ashton Smith, Ballantine, 95¢

SOME THINGS DARK AND DANGEROUS, Joan Kahn, ed., Harper, $4.95

RATMAN'S NOTEBOOKS, Stephen Gilbert, Lancer, 95¢

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the Britannica, some say word by word. He lived for most of his life in the same isolated cabin he'd grown up in, put off getting married until his sixty-first year, and avoided both regular employment and having to depend upon his artistic output for a living by developing a wide variety of salable skills. He was, according to a partial listing by none other than Boris Karloff, a "journalist, wood-chopper, fruit-packer, typist, gardener, cement-mixer, miner, and windlasser."

Smith began selling fiction to the pulps in the late twenties, appearing in publications with such magnificent names as: *Stirring Science Fiction, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Amazing Detective Stories,* and—what visions of naughtiness this last one evokes! —*La Paree Stories.* His first for *Weird Tales* (September, 1928) was "The Ninth Skeleton"—the skeleton was described as having "a lipless and ingratiating

but mostly his tales were sly and subtle jibes at mankind's aspirations, chilling little fables of a startling bleakness. They were beautifully constructed, full of lovely images and absolutely sumptuous English, but they were deadly. Reading them was a tiny bit like being skillfully murdered with a Cellini stiletto, or dining well at the Borgias.

The message patiently taught the reader of Smith's bejeweled little bear traps was that man's evil and stupidity is beyond plumbing; but that for all of it, and for all of his good what's more, he is doomed to be snuffed out by forces only vaguely aware of him, if aware at all. You can see how this might have been a little rough on a reader of, say, *Wonder Stories Quarterly,* particularly when he'd just finished something assuring him that all would be well with us once we'd managed to perfect the interstellar space ship

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bring today. Then, in forty-two, Arkham House published OUT OF SPACE AND TIME for its third book, and thus began the laudable task of putting Smith's short stories between hard covers. Now, with OTHER DIMENSIONS, they have completed the job. This sixth and last volume is in the nature of a final wrapping-up and so contains some material that is decidedly not Smith at his best, but there is plenty of lovely work in it, and certainly no serious collector of his writings would consider passing it by. I might point out that the first book in the series has gone from $3.00 to $150.00, and that the second (LOST WORLDS, Arkham House, $3.00 back in 1944) has touched the century mark, so you could pick this latest one up strictly as a good investment, though God help you if you're that myopic.

Now that Arkham House has completed its hard cover rescue mission on Smith, the first of the Smith paperbacks has at last been brought out (ZOTHIQUE, Ballantine). I guess, as they used to say in the Walt Disney shorts on those cute wild animals, it is part of Nature's Plan. It strikes me as remarkable that no one has had the good sense to do it before now, but my sincere congratulations to Lin Carter, the editor of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, and to all else at that institution who had anything to do with the project. ZOTHIQUE is an anthology of stories that share as a common background one of Smith's most ghoulish fantasy worlds—an Earth where the sea has swallowed up all but one continent, where the sun is slowly fizzling out, and man has regressed to ignorant, ugly magic. Necromancers thrive, dark and inescapable curses abound, and extinction chews at the edges. Mr. Carter has arranged these fascinatingly morbid fantasies in a perfectly satisfactory kind of chronological order so the thing may be read as a novel, if you like. Myself I would suggest you nibble rather more cautiously at these dainties, taking them one or two at a time. A reading of ZOTHIQUE at a sitting might do something serious to the cellular structure of your brain.

Speaking of Ballantine Books, they are also Beagle Books, or at least Ballantine Books and Beagle Books operate from the same address and begin with "Bs." Whatever, be it Beagle or be it Ballantine, they are bringing out a series of Lovecraft books, and I gather the whole thing is very official as it is called THE ARKHAM EDITION OF H. P. LOVECRAFT and August Derleth is the editor. The first one is THE TOMB (A Beagle Horror Collection, 95¢), and they plan to bring out not only the writings of H. P. L., himself, but the works of other authors working in the Mythos bag. Cthulhu for the masses, in other words. A splendid project. An ad I

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came across for the series quotes from the NECRONOMICON in the Old Tongue, and then goes on to say that no one knows much about the Old Tongue except that it was thickly coated. This is a clear indication there are a number of cultured and sensitive individuals behind this enterprise, and I wish them well.

In mainstream publishing, as science fiction reviewers are wont to say (though I have never liked, nor really understood, the odd implication of acceptance of one's own field of interest as a kind of stagnant backwater), I came across a couple of interesting items bobbing around. The first is a collection by the famous Joan Kahn, the legendary editor of the Harper Novels of Suspense, called SOME THINGS DARK AND DANGEROUS, and it contains some excellent material: stories by such varied authors as Waugh, LeFanu, Blackwood and F. Marion Crawford; horrific essays by such as Pearson, Prescott and Coates. The only angle that puts me off it, and put me off by God it does, is that the thing is supposed to be aimed at children. Now why this particular group of shockers should have "Age 12 up" on its flyleaf and a forward by Miss Kahn which makes you feel as if you were being patted on the top of your head by the town librarian, I cannot say. Miss Kahn's two previous anthologies were supposedly for grownups. Again, now that I think of it, I can't explain the classification. Perhaps it's because they were larger books and made more of a demand on one's attention span.

The other mainstream item (I'm starting to see why the word is cherished by so many) is a Literary Guild Selection which, when it came out in hard cover, got excellent notices from mainstream reviewers (I take it all back—it's a swell word), so when I saw it in paperback, I seized upon it at once. It is RATMAN'S NOTEBOOKS, it's by Stephen Gilbert, and it is, I'm afraid, completely unconvincing. It's a pity, because he has a nice basic idea, a grisly little misfit taking his revenge out on society with a pack of trained rats, but he just doesn't follow any of the rules of consistency or logical development, or staying within his premise, so the whole thing collapses early on. Nice scenes, here and there, and if they fooled with it they might make a good horror movie out of it, but the book doesn't work. Back to the Littlestream.

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Michael Gillgannon ("Mr. Krisky's Cross," January 1971) returns with a gently wacky story about The Regress Research Group, the outfit behind the common cold, cavities and burned-out light bulbs.

Un-Inventor Wanted

by MICHAEL GILLGANNON

THE SECRETARY (WHO WORE GREEN eye shadow) handed him a job application form and smiled thinly as if to indicate that he was no more useful to her than an escaped mental patient or a diseased gopher. Such looks he had endured before; he expected them as surely as he expected the hollow shuffle of bill collectors at his door. They always wore shiny black shoes, a status symbol, he assumed. He took the application to a small desk in a corner of the office and began to write busily on its dotted lines.

It requested that he give his name and he complied; his name was Oscar Troutt, with two t's. It asked how old he was and he wrote 32. It wanted to know his marital status; so he put an X through SINGLE. And —oh, so many things; it's like a confessional, he thought. Snoop into this, snoop into that. PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT. They should ask! Is there enough ink in the pen to tell it all? Well, there was the Vacutex Company (Ltd.), for which he sold vacuum cleaners and floor polishers—no ma'am there is absolutely no cost or obligation, and every claim I make for this wonderful product I intend to prove; just let me show you a few of its work-saving features—and before that he had a milk route and before that he cut hair in Kansas City until a man died in his chair while arguing with him about the outcome of the 1952 World Series, and before that he was a semi-professional shoplifter, but don't put that down.

WHO REFERRED YOU TO THE REGRESS RESEARCH GROUP?

It was a day in June, Tuesday perhaps, and Oscar Troutt was walking in the sun, feeling good because it was a bright day, feeling bad because he had no money, at

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any rate feeling . . . different . . . because he was out of a job while all about him walked people who had someplace to go and someone to see. It wasn't so much that he liked to work, but he did occasionally like to eat, and the one seemed to be inextricably linked with the other. A shoddy arrangement, he thought, but what can you do?

He crossed Pender Street to look at a display of sausages in the window of Zutke's Meat Market. This accomplished, he headed for a penny arcade on Granville Street, while his stomach condemned him for his pimpernelian work habits. As he was passing a series of uninteresting shop fronts and gray office buildings, a small hand-lettered sign in one of the offices brought him up short.

The sign read: UN-INVENTOR WANTED.

Mr. Troutt didn't know what an un-inventor was. He examined the sign carefully, as if considering it for a private art collection. UN-INVENTOR WANTED. What will they think of next? It occurred to him that he was probably as good an un-inventor as the next man. To his knowledge he had never invented a single thing—perhaps that fact alone earned him the title; perhaps he was the greatest un-inventor the world had ever known! He forgot about the penny arcade and stepped into the office and approached the secretary (who wore green eye shadow).

So to answer the question, WHO REFERRED YOU TO THE REGRESS RESEARCH GROUP? Mr. Troutt wrote, "I saw your sign in the window." For indeed, he had never heard of the Regress Research Group before.

He completed the application and returned it to the secretary. She accepted it as she might have accepted a gift of a radioactive isotope.

"Sit over there, why don't you? Mr. Humid will see you shortly."

"Over there" meant the chair he had just vacated and "shortly" meant 25 minutes. In the interim Mr. Troutt twiddled his thumbs, trying without success to make one thumb go clockwise and the other counterclockwise. It was a trick he never expected to master.

At last the secretary announced that Mr. Humid would deign to see him.

Mr. Humid had a private, wood-paneled office that bristled with arty photographs of what must have been Regress Research Group executives. Some of them smiled, some of them frowned, all of them looked rich. Mr. Humid himself looked like he wanted to be rich. It showed in his eyes, which were crinkled from smiling a lot, and in his voice, which was creamy and mellow as he said, "How do you do, Mr. Troot, please sit down."

"That's Troutt, with a *u*, not Troot," said Mr. Troutt.

"Of course it is," said Mr. Humid, "of course it is." He swiveled ex-

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pansively in his big chair, forgiving himself for his initial blunder. "I hope we didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Oh, about a half hour," said Mr. Troutt.

"Well, that's fine, that's fine. I've been looking over your application, Mr. . . . Troutt, and it would appear that you are, as they say, a man of the world."

Mr. Troutt had never thought of himself as a man of the world.

"I mean, you've been around?"

"That's true," he agreed, "I have been around."

"So in that context you might be called a man of the world, as it were."

Mr. Troutt absorbed the information with the interest he might assign to yesterday's weather report.

"I saw your sign in the window. It says you want an un-inventor."

"Yes, that's quite true. An un-inventor." Mr. Humid interlocked his fingers and rested his chin on them. Oscar caught a whiff of shaving cream. "Do you know what an un-inventor is, Mr. Troutt?"

Oscar detected thin ice, but he wasn't so dumb. "Doesn't everybody?" he said.

Mr. Humid tried out his I-want-to-be-rich smile. "Well now, Mr. Troutt, if the truth be known, and just between the two of us, most people haven't the *foggiest*. The man in the street wouldn't know an un-inventor if one jumped up and down on his toes. How do you like that?" Mr. Humid smiled again. "That's good."

"You'd better believe it. That's the way it *should* be." He leaned slightly over the desk to convey a dark secret. "What people don't know won't hurt them."

"You can say that again."

Mr. Humid didn't say it again. Instead he looked closely at Oscar, appraising him for flaws. "By the way, Mr. Troutt, do you know any un-inventors yourself?"

"As you say, they're hard to spot."

"We at Regress are proud of that. You might even say we actively seek nonpublicity. I see from your application that no one referred you to us. You simply saw the sign and . . ."

"Came in."

"Came in, that's right. And this may be your lucky day, Mr. Troutt. I think you were destined to see that sign."

"You do?"

"I'm a great believer in destiny."

"That's nice."

"I consider myself a pretty fair judge of character, and I want to tell you that you strike me as potentially a first-class un-inventor."

Mr. Troutt was glad to hear that he had such potential, but he still didn't know what an un-inventor was.

"I have a confession to make," he said. "I don't really know what an un-inventor is."

The interviewer swiveled in his

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chair and made his eyes crinkle with forgiveness. "That's all right," he said. "That's all right." He stopped swiveling long enough to open a desk drawer. He took from it a white, unmarked tube and tossed it at Oscar. "What would you guess is in that tube?"

Oscar unscrewed the cap and sniffed. He squeezed the tube, forcing out a sticky, ivory-colored goop. "Toothpaste, maybe?"

"Toothpaste, exactly," said Mr. Humid. "But not your ordinary run-of-the-mill toothpaste. What you hold in your hand, Mr. Troutt, is the ultimate toothpaste."

"It's good, is it?"

"It's ultimate. Would you believe me if I told you that regular use of this toothpaste would completely eliminate cavities? Not reduce them, but *eliminate* them, no ifs, ands or buts?"

"I don't know."

"But it's true. It's the greatest toothpaste in the world, Mr. Troutt."

"That's some toothpaste."

"And I'll bet if you saw it in a drugstore, you'd buy it right away, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Because it's really a great thing, isn't it?"

"It must be."

"No, Mr. Troutt, it isn't a great thing—it's a terrible thing."

"You mean having sound teeth is bad?"

"It's a terrible thing," Mr. Humid repeated. "What would our poor dentists do if nobody had cavities?"

"Maybe they could become carpenters."

A weak laugh escaped the not-yet-rich interviewer. "You're not seeing it in quite the right light yet, Mr. Troutt. What if you were a dentist and all of a sudden people stopped getting cavities and your appointment book started to look like you were working in a ghost town? Do you think you'd feel secure? Don't you think you might get a little tense?"

"A little."

"Maybe more than a little?"

Mr. Troutt said nothing, merely crossed his legs and inserted a finger in his ear, searching for wax.

"So what if there was an organization that could do something to help you, again assuming you were a dentist threatened by this terrible toothpaste?"

"But how would this organization help me?"

Mr. Humid swiveled ecstatically. "By un-inventing the ultimate toothpaste, that's how! If there were no ultimate toothpaste, there would be no worried dentists, and everything would be as it was!"

"But people would still have cavities."

"What are a few million cavities when the entire dental profession is threatened with near-extinction? We must assign our priorities where they'll do the most good."

"And that organization—it is

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called the Regress Research Group?"

"Exactly," chuckled Mr. Humid. "Exactly. Regress is vitally interested in the good of the country. We think un-inventing should be part of the American tradition, like Plymouth Rock and French-fried potatoes. We shape the future by maintaining the present. Not every company can say that, Mr. Troutt."

"I suppose this toothpaste is just a sample of what you've un-invented."

"Oh my, yes. We can un-invent just about anything if the need arises."

"The better mousetrap, for instance?"

"We did away with it years ago, when I was a trainee."

"Permanent light bulbs?"

"Child's play!"

"How about the cure for the common cold?"

"We're working on it."

Oscar's stomach issued a lingering distress signal, which he tried to override with another question.

"How?" he asked, "how do you un-invent things?"

"Well now, that's a good question." Appreciation seeped from Mr. Humid. "How do we un-invent things? Basically there are two ways, Mr. Troutt. One of them is money; the other is force. How simple can you get?"

How simple can you get, thought Mr. Troutt, as he knocked on the door of a house on Rutabaga Street. The dossier in his brief case said Ely Pim lived there. Ely Pim was an inventor. Ely Pim was Oscar's first prospect as an un-inventor, and he had high hopes, for backing him were two great resources, money and force.

A woman with gray hair and full-blown breasts opened the door.

"We've got all the brushes we need," she said, and slammed the door before Mr. Troutt could fire up his vocal cords for a smiling (but firm) explanation.

He knocked again, with more authority, he hoped. When the door opened a second time, he said, "Mrs Pim I'm from the Regress Research Group may I see your husband?"

"No brushes, no life insurance, no encyclopedias?"

"None of that. This is important business. It concerns your husband's work."

She examined him as if he were a glob of inferior round steak in a meat case, finally unbent enough to say, "He's in the back, in his workshop." Again she shut the door, but more gently.

A sidewalk lay along the north side of the house. Oscar followed it to the backyard, and there was the workshop, an ugly affair that might have been built by a team of one-armed men, so haphazard was its design. Extra rooms swelled like blisters to accommodate Mr. Pim's brainchildren.

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Before Mr. Troutt's knuckles could contact the door, it swung open and a man confronted him. The man was short and furry, like a koala bear, but not much. Oscar had an urge to pat him on the head, but he refrained. The man's hair was long and his beard was full. He said, "Welcome to my workshop," and he smiled in a friendly way.

Mr. Troutt smiled back and introduced himself.

"Regress Research Group, did you say? That's a funny-sounding place to be from."

"It's part of the American tradition," said Oscar.

"So are bank holdups."

"I was thinking more of Plymouth Rock," said Oscar.

"Yes, I suppose you were," said the furry man. "Come in and let me show you around."

Oscar saw at once that rhyme and reason weren't Mr. Pim's dominant characteristics. The workshop looked like a cross between a wind-tossed army-surplus store and the inside of a politician's head. In the main part of the shop a blue Volkswagen lay partly disassembled, its bumpers turning slowly to rust. Near it was a brass bed, fitted with rumpled sheets and a quilt. Tools of all descriptions lay on the floor, on several workbenches, and in Mr. Pim's pockets. One part of the place sparkled with the stuff of chemists— Erlenmeyer flasks, pipettes, and other strange glassware, while in another part trays were heaped high with capacitors, resistors, semiconductors, and girlie magazines. A guillotine stood near the far wall.

Mr. Pim lifted himself onto a bench. His feet cleared the floor by twelve inches. "How do you like my workshop, Mr. Troutt from the Regress Research Group?"

"I think it's just fine."

"But you're wondering what the guillotine is for."

"Sort of."

"I couldn't tell you. Sometimes I use it to slice my wife's pumpernickel bread, but as yet it isn't part of the grand design."

"Well," said Oscar. "Well, well."

"You look like you have something on your mind, Mr. Troutt."

"In fact, Mr. Pim, I do. It concerns one of your inventions."

"Which one?"

"The Cloak of Invisibility."

Mr. Pim smiled through his beard. "I'm not surprised. The Cloak of Invisibility is my most important invention. I wonder how you came to know about it?"

"The government is interested, Mr. Pim."

"Which government?"

This question confused Oscar. "You know," he said, "the *government*."

"Ah," said Mr. Pim, "the *government*."

"And it wants to buy your invention. You might say I'm mediating between the government and you."

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"Is that so? I wonder what the government would do with a Cloak of Invisibility?"

"That's hard to say, Mr. Pim. Maybe it's none of our business." Oscar did not feel compelled to tell Mr. Pim that he was an un-inventor. It might confuse the issue. "I wonder if you might show me the invention?"

"Well now, it's hard to see a Cloak of Invisibility, Mr. Troutt."

"In that case, I wonder if you might *not* show it to me?"

"That's easy enough. I think it's hanging by the door." He hopped off the bench. "At least I hope so. Sometimes I mislay things—must keep up the image, you know."

Three coat hooks were screwed into the wall near the door, but nothing appeared to be hanging from them. The inventor ran his hand over the area. "Here it is," he said. "How do you like it?"

Oscar touched it; it had the texture of . . . he didn't know what. "It's quite the invention," he said, "but it feels very strange."

"Like cottage cheese, maybe?"

He thought about it for a second. "Yes, I suppose it does feel like cottage cheese. How does it work?"

"It couldn't be easier. You just put it on and it makes you invisible. Like so." The inventor put on the invisible cloak and Oscar couldn't see him any more, which was proof enough for him that it worked. He stuck out his hand and encountered Mr. Pim's beard.

"I'm prepared to offer you $50,000 for your invention, Mr. Pim."

"Which means you're really prepared to offer me a hundred thousand, except that we'll haggle about it and you think I'll settle for seventy-five. But in fact, Mr. Troutt, I don't want to sell it to you, or to the *government*, or to anyone else."

Oscar couldn't see Mr. Pim, but he pretended that he could. He wondered if he hadn't had an easier time selling vacuum cleaners or delivering milk. He almost wished he were someplace else, but then he reminded himself that un-inventing was for the good of the country, and forged ahead.

"Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money, Mr. Pim."

"And fifty thousand hamburgers is a lot of hamburgers."

"You'd be helping your country by letting the government have your invention."

"How?"

"What if your Invisibility Cloak wound up in the wrong hands?"

"My sentiments exactly, Mr. Troutt. And now you know why I can't sell it to the government."

"I do?"

"Think about it."

Oscar recalled that he had an ace up his sleeve. "I must warn you, Mr. Pim, that I'm authorized to use force if necessary."

"And who authorized you to use force, Mr. Troutt?"

"The company, of course."

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"Of course," said the invisible Mr. Pim, "it was a stupid question." He removed the Cloak and stood in all his shortness before Oscar. "Go ahead then."

"You don't think I will, do you?"

"Do you?"

Oscar didn't think so, but if he didn't use force and if he didn't uninvent the Cloak, what would he tell Mr. Humid, what would Mr. Humid tell the rich men whose pictures decorated his wall, what would Mr. Humid tell *him*?

"Haven't you a sense of patriotism, Mr. Pim?"

"No."

The inventor's reply caused Oscar's company-inspired logic to crash noisily in his head. He tried to work up a case of righteous indignation, as he knew Mr. Humid would have done, but he failed. All in all, he thought Mr. Pim was pretty harmless. Still. . . .

"I can't go back empty-handed, Mr. Pim."

"Then don't go back at all. My wife makes delicious pumpernickel. You should have some and take your mind off your troubles."

Before Oscar could say yes, no or maybe, someone knocked forcefully on the workshop door. Mr. Pim hung the Cloak of Invisibility back on its hook. He opened the door and there stood Mr. Humid, smiling professionally. His hand was extended. "My name is Sewall Humid," he said. "You must be Ely Pim. I'm Mr. Troutt's supervisor, you know, and I thought I'd drop by to see how things are going."

"Well, you couldn't have come at a better time. Your Mr. Troutt has convinced me that the patriotic thing to do is to hand my Cloak of Invisibility over to the government."

Mr. Humid's face was a road map of happy wrinkles. "That is very big-hearted of you, Mr. Pim."

"In fact, I can't even demand payment. I feel it's my duty as a citizen to let you have it, free of charge."

"A wonderful gesture, wonderful."

Meanwhile, Mr. Troutt wasn't sure he was hearing correctly. But before he could spill any beans, the inventor spoke to him.

"Why don't we not show Mr. Humid the Cloak, my friend? It's on the bed, isn't it?"

"The bed?"

"Yes, didn't I leave it on the bed?"

Without thinking much about it, Oscar heard himself say, "Yes, you did. I'll get it for you." He pretended to lift something off the quilt and carry it to Mr. Pim, who accepted it with mock ceremony.

"Here you are, Mr. Humid, I'll just put this on you to demonstrate."

"It's very light. I can't feel a thing."

"But you're invisible and that's the important thing. Isn't he, Mr. Troutt?"

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As invisible as they come," said Oscar, although in fact, Mr. Humid was as clear as the noonday sun.

Mr. Pim groped blindly in front of him until he encountered Mr. Humid. He took off the invisible Cloak of Invisibility. "I'll put it in a bag for you, how's that?"

"That's fine, Mr. Pim, and don't you worry—I'll see that you get a certificate for your patriotism."

The inventor searched for a sack, found one on a workbench. It had something in it, which he dumped out. His lunch. He stuffed the imaginary Cloak into the sack.

"Here you are," he said. "My contribution to world order."

Mr. Humid accepted the bag reverently and prepared to leave. "Thank you again, Mr. Pim. I'll be seeing you."

"Maybe, maybe not," said the furry inventor.

"Are you coming, Mr. Troutt?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Mr. Pim invited me to try his wife's pumpernickel."

"All right, then. Good-by."

"Good-by, good-by," said Oscar and Mr. Pim.

And when he was gone Oscar wondered what had come over him.

"A fit of sanity, maybe," the inventor guessed.

"But he'll be back and he won't be happy."

"You're forgetting, Oscar, I have a Cloak of Invisibility."

"What about me?"

"You have better things to do," Mr. Pim replied.

Oscar supposed that he did, and one of them was to eat Mrs. Pim's pumpernickel. He ate more than he really wanted, for he had a feeling that he would be hungry the next day.

J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis . . .

shared a common interest in the meaning and power of fantasy, grace and romantic love which has had a profound effect upon religion and literature. Gunnar Urang makes a significant contribution to both fields as he explores, with unusual insight, their writings and their friendship in

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This evocatively written and ultimately chilling fantasy concerns two children and their contact with a group of peddlers that seem mysteriously removed from the contemporary American setting of the story. It's an unusual and rewarding piece, and we hope to see more from Mr. Dybek, who writes that he's just finished teaching two years of junior high in St. Thomas and will be attending Iowa University, working towards a degree in creative writing.

The Palatski Man

by STUART DYBEK.

HE REAPPEARED IN SPRING, some Sunday morning, perhaps Easter, when the twigs of the catalpa trees budded and lawns smelled of mud and breaking seeds. Or Palm Sunday, returning from mass with handfuls of blessed, bending palms to be cut into crosses and pinned on your Sunday dress and the year-old palms removed by John from behind the pictures of Jesus with his burning heart and the Virgin with her sad eyes, to be placed dusty and crumbling in an old coffee can and burned in the back yard. And once walking back from church, Albert Laska said these are what they lashed Jesus with. And she said no they aren't, they used whips. They used these, he insisted. What do you know, she said. And he told her she was a dumb girl and lashed her across her bare legs with his blessed palms. They stung her; she started to cry that anyone could do such a thing, and he caught her running down 25th St. with her skirt flying and got her against a fence, and grabbing her by the hair he stuck his scratchy palms in her face, and suddenly he was lifted off the ground and flung to the sidewalk, and she saw her brother John standing over him very red in the face; and when Albert Laska tried to run away,

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John blocked him, and Albert tried to dodge around him as if they were playing football; and as he cut past, John slapped him across the face; his head snapped back and his nose started to bleed. John didn't chase him and he ran halfway down the block, turned around and yelled through his tears with blood dripping on his white shirt: I hate you goddamn you I hate you! All the dressed-up people coming back from church saw it happen and shook their heads. John said com'on Mary let's go home.

No, it wasn't that day, but it was in that season on a Sunday that he reappeared, and then every Sunday after that through the summer and into the fall when school would resume and the green catalpa leaves fall like withered fans into the birdbaths, turning the water brown, the Palatski Man would come.

He was an old man who pushed a white cart through the neighborhood streets ringing a little golden bell. He would stop at each corner, and the children would come with their money to inspect the taffy apples sprinkled with chopped nuts, or the red candy apples on pointed sticks, or the palatski displayed under the glass of the white cart. She had seen taffy apples in the candy stores and even the red apples sold by clowns at circuses; but she had never seen palatski sold anywhere else. It was two crisp wafers stuck together with honey. The taste might have reminded you of ice cream cones spread with honey, but it reminded Mary of Holy Communion. It felt like the Eucharist in her mouth, the way it tasted walking back from the communion rail after waiting for Father Joe to stand before her wearing his rustling silk vestments with the organ playing and him saying the Latin prayer over and over faster than she could ever hope to pray and making a sign of the cross with the host just before placing it on someone's tongue. She knelt at the communion rail close enough to the altar to see the silk curtains drawn inside the open tabernacle and the beeswax candles flickering and to smell the flowers. Father Joe was moving down the line of communicants, holding the chalice, with the altar boy, an eighth grader, sometimes even John, standing beside him in a lace surplice, holding the paten under each chin; and she would close her eyes and open her mouth, sticking her tongue out, and hear the prayer and feel the host placed gently on her tongue. Sometimes Father's hand brushed her bottom lip, and she would feel a spark from his finger which Sister said was static electricity, not the Holy Spirit.

Then she would walk down the aisle among the lines of communicants, searching through half-shut eyes for her pew, her mind praying Jesus help us find it. And when she found her pew, she would kneel down and shut her eyes and bury

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her face in her hands praying over and over thank you Jesus for coming to me, feeling the host stuck to the roof of her mouth, melting against her tongue like a warm, wheaty snowflake; and she would turn the tip of her tongue inward and lick the host off the ridges of her mouth till it was loosened by saliva and swallowed into her soul.

Who was the Palatski Man? No one knew or even seemed to care. He was an old man with an unremembered face, perhaps a never-seen face, a head hidden by a cloth-visored cap, and eyes concealed behind dark glasses with green, smoked lenses. His smile revealed only a gold crown and a missing tooth. His only voice was the ringing bell, and his hands were rough and red as if scrubbed with sandpaper and their skin very hard when you opened your hand for your change and his fingers brushed yours. His clothes were always the same—white—not starched and dazzling, but the soft white of many washings and wringings.

No one cared and he was left alone. The boys didn't torment him as they did the peddlers during the week. There was constant war between the boys and the peddlers, the umbrella menders, the knife sharpeners, anyone whose business carried them down the side streets or through the alleys. The peddlers came every day, spring, summer, and autumn through the alleys behind the backyard fences crying, "Rags ol irn, rags ol irn!" Riding their ancient, rickety wagons with huge wooden-spoked wheels, heaped high with scraps of metal, frames of furniture, coal-black cobwebbed lumber, bundles of rags and filthy newspapers. The boys called them the Ragmen. They were all old, hunched men, bearded and bald, who bargained in a stammered foreign English, and dressed in clothes extracted from the bundles of rags in their weather-beaten wagons.

Their horses seemed even more ancient than their masters, and Mary was always sorry for them as she watched their slow, arthritic gait up and down the alleys. Most of them were white horses, a dirty white as if their original colors had turned white with age, like the hair on an old man's head. They had enormous hooves with iron shoes that clacked down the alleys over the broken glass which squeeked against concrete when the rusty, metal-rimmed wheels of the wagon ground over it. Their muzzles were pink without hair, and their tongues lolled out grey; their teeth were huge and yellow. Over their eyes were black blinders, around their shoulders a heavy black harness that looked always ready to slip off, leather straps hung all about their bodies. They ate from black, worn leather sacks tied over their faces, and as they ate, the flies flew up from their manure and climbed all over their thick bodies, and they

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swished at them with stringy tails.

The Ragmen drove down the crooked, interconnecting alleys crying, "Rags ol irn, rags ol irn," and the boys waited for the wagon to pass, hiding behind fences or garbage cans; and as soon as it passed, they would follow, running half bent over so that the Ragman couldn't see them if he turned around over the piles heaped on his wagon. They would run to the tailgate and grab onto it, swinging up, the taller ones like John stretching their legs onto the rear axle, the shorter ones just hanging as the wagon rolled along. Sometimes one of the bolder ones would try to climb up on the wagon itself and throw off some of the junk. The Ragman would see him and pull the reins, stopping the wagon. He would begin gesturing and yelling at the boys, who jumped from the wagon and stood back laughing and hollering back, "Rags ol irn, rags ol irn!" Sometimes he'd grab a makeshift whip, a piece of clothesline tied to a stick, from the seat and stagger after them as they scattered laughing before him, disappearing over fences and down gangways only to reappear again around the corner of some other alley, reassembled, lying flattened out on a garage roof, to jump up and shower the wagon with garbage as it passed beneath.

Mary could never fully understand why her brother participated. He wasn't a bully like Albert Laska and certainly not cruel like Freddie Sveltek, who tortured cats. She sensed the boys' vague condemnation of the Ragmen for the sad condition of their horses. But that was only a small part of it, for often the horses as well as their masters were harassed. She thought it was a venial sin and wondered if John confessed it the Thursday before each First Friday when they would go together to confession in the afternoon: Bless me father for I have sinned, I threw garbage on a Ragman five times this month. For your penance say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys, go in peace. She never mentioned this to him, feeling that whatever made him do it was a part of what made him generally unafraid, a part of what the boys felt when they elected him Captain of the St. Roman Grammar School baseball team. She couldn't bear it if he thought she was a dumb girl. She never snitched on him. If she approached him when he was surrounded by his friends, he would loudly announce, "Alright, nobody swear while Mary's here."

At home he often took her into his confidence. This was what she liked the most. When after supper while her parents watched TV in the parlor, he would come into her room where she was doing her homework and lie down on her bed and start talking, telling her who among his friends was a good first sacker, or which one of the girls in his class tried to get him to dance

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with her at the school party, just talking and sometimes even asking her opinion on something like if she thought he should let his hair grow long like that idiot Peter Noskin, who couldn't even make the team as a right fielder. What did she think of guys like that? She tried to tell him things back. How Sister Mary Valentine had caught Albert Laska in the girls' washroom yesterday. And then one night he told her about Mike Porter, which she knew was a secret because their father had warned John not to hang around with him even if he was the best pitcher on the team. He told her how after school he and Mike Porter had followed a Ragman to Hobotown, which was far away past Western Avenue on the other side of the river, down by the river and the railroad tracks, and that they had a regular town there without any streets. They lived among huge heaps of junk, rubbled lots tangled with smashed, rusting cars and bathtubs, rotting mounds of rags and paper, woodpiles infested with river rats. Their wagons were all lined up and the horses kept in a deserted factory with broken windows. They lived in shacks that were falling apart, some of them made out of old boxcars, and there was a blacksmith with a burning forge working in a ruined shed made of bricks and timbers with a roof of canvas.

He told her how they had snuck around down the riverbank in the high weeds and watched the Ragmen come in from all parts of the city, pulled by their tired horses, hundreds of Ragmen arriving in silence, and how they assembled in front of a great fire burning in the middle of all the shacks where something was cooking in a huge, charred pot.

Their scroungy dogs scratched and circled around the fire while the Ragmen stood about and seemed to be trading among each other: bales of worn clothing for baskets of tomatoes, bushels of fruit for twisted metals, cases of dust-filled bottles for burnt couches and lamps with frazzled wires. They knelt, peering out of the weeds and watching them, and then Mike whispered let's sneak around to the building where the horses are kept and look at them.

So they crouched through the weeds and ran from shack to shack until they came to the back of the old factory. They could smell the horses and hay inside and hear the horses sneezing. They snuck in through a busted window. The factory was dark and full of spiderwebs, and they felt their way through a passage which entered into a high-ceilinged hall where the horses were stabled. It was dim, some rays of sun sifted down through the dust from the broken roof. The horses didn't look the same in the dimness and without their harnesses. They looked huge and beautiful, and when you

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reached to pat them, their muscles quivered so that you flinched with fright.

"Wait'll the guys hear about this," John said.

And Mike whispered, "Let's steal one! We can take him to the river and ride him."

John didn't know what to say. Mike was fourteen. His parents were divorced. He had failed a year in school and often hung around with high school guys. Everybody knew that he had been caught in a stolen car, but that the police let him go because he was so much younger than the other guys. He was part Mexican and knew a lot about horses. John didn't like the idea of stealing.

"We couldn't get one out of here," he said.

"Sure we could," Mike said. "We could get on one and gallop out with him before they knew what was going on."

"Suppose we get caught," John said.

"Who'd believe the Ragmen anyway?" Mike asked him. "They can't even speak English. You chicken?"

So they picked out a huge white horse to ride, who stood still and uninterested when John boosted Mike up on his back and then Mike reached down and pulled him up. Mike held his mane and John held on to Mike's waist. Mike nudged his heels into the horse's flanks and he began to move, slowly swaying towards the light of the doorway.

"As soon as we get outside," Mike whispered, "hold on, I'm gonna goose him."

John's palms were sweating by this time because being on this horse felt like straddling a blimp as it rose over the roofs. When they got to the door, Mike hollered, "Heya!" and kicked his heels hard, and the horse bolted out, and before he knew what had happened, John felt himself sliding and then dropping a long way and the sudden hard smack of the hay-strewn floor. He looked up and realized he had never made it out of the barn, and then he heard the shouting and barking of the dogs and, looking out, saw Mike half riding, half hanging from the horse, which reared again and again near the fire, surrounded by the shouting Ragmen, and he saw the look on Mike's face as he was bucked from the horse into their arms. There was a paralyzed second when they all glanced towards him standing in the doorway of the barn, and then he whirled around and stumbled past the now-pitching bulks of horses whinnying all about him and found the passage, struggling through it, bumping into walls, spiderwebs sticking to his face, with the shouts and barks gaining on him, and then he was out the window and running up a hill of weeds and crushed coal slipping under his feet, skidding up and down two more hills, down railroad tracks, not turning around, just running un-

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til he could no longer breathe, and above him he saw a bridge and clawed up the grassy embankment till he reached it.

It was rush hour and the bridge was crowded with people going home, factory workers carrying lunch pails and business men with attache cases. The street was packed with traffic, and he didn't know where he was or what he should do about Mike. He decided to go home and see what would happen. He'd call Mike that night, and if he wasn't home, then he'd tell them about the Ragmen. But he couldn't find his way back. Finally he had to ask a cop where he was, and the cop put him on a trolley car that got him home.

He called Mike about 8 o'clock, and his mother answered the phone and told him Mike had just got in and went right to bed, and Johnny asked her if he could speak to him, and she said she'd go see, and he heard her set down the receiver and her footsteps walk away. He realized his own heartbeat was no longer deafening and felt the knots in his stomach loosen. Then he heard Mike's mother say that she was sorry but that Mike didn't want to talk to him.

The next day at school he saw Mike and asked him what happened, if he was angry that he had run out on him, and Mike said, no, nothing happened, to forget it. He kept asking Mike how he got away, but Mike wouldn't say anything until he mentioned telling the other guys about it. Mike said if he told anybody he'd deny it ever happened, that there was such a place. Johnny thought he was just kidding, but when he told the guys, Mike told them Johnny made the whole thing up, and they almost got into a fight, pushing each other back and forth, nobody taking the first swing, until the guys stepped between them and broke it up. Johnny lost his temper and said he'd take anybody who wanted to go next Saturday to see for themselves. They could go on their bikes and hide them in the weeds by the river and sneak up on the Ragmen. Mike said go on.

So on Saturday John and six guys met at his place and peddled toward the river and railroad tracks, down the busy trucking streets where the semis passed you so fast your bike seemed about to be sucked away by the draft. They got to Western Avenue and the river, and it looked the same and didn't look the same. They left the street and pumped their bikes down a dirt road left through the weeds by bulldozers, passing rusty barges moored to the banks, seemingly abandoned in the oily river. They passed a shack or two, but they were empty. John kept looking for the three mounds of black cinders for a landmark but couldn't find them. They rode their bikes down the railroad tracks, and it wasn't like being in the center of the city

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at all, with the smell of milkweeds and noise of birds and crickets all about them and the spring sun glinting down the railroad tracks. No one was around. It was like being far out in the country. They rode until they could see the skyline of downtown, skyscrapers rising up through the smoke of chimneys like a horizon of jagged mountains in the mist. By now everyone was kidding him about the Ragmen, and finally he had to admit he couldn't find them, and they gave up. They all peddled back, kidding him, and he bought everybody cokes, and they admitted they had had a pretty good time anyway, even though he sure as hell was some storyteller.

And then he figured something must have happened to Mike. It hit him Sunday night, lying in bed trying to sleep, and he knew he'd have to talk to him about it Monday when he saw him at school, but on Monday Mike was absent and was absent on Tuesday, and on Wednesday they found out that Mike had run away from home and no one could find him.

No one ever found him, and he wasn't there in June when John and his classmates filed down the aisle, their maroon robes flowing and white tassels swinging almost in time to the organ, to receive their diplomas and shake hands with Father Joe. And the next week it was summer, and she was permitted to go to the beach with her girl friends. Her girl friends came over and giggled whenever John came into the room.

On Sundays they went to late Mass. She wore her print, flowered dress and a white mantilla in church when she sat beside John among the adults. After Mass they'd stop at the corner of 25th St. on their way home and buy palatski and walk home eating it with its crispness melting and the sweet honey crust becoming chewy. She remembered how she used to pretend it was manna they'd been rewarded with for keeping the Sabbath. It tasted extra good because she had skipped breakfast. She fasted before receiving Communion.

Then it began to darken earlier, and the kids played tag and roliveo in the dusk and hid from each other behind trees and in doorways, and the girls laughed and blushed when the boys chased and tagged them. She had her own secret hiding place down the block, in a garden under a lilac bush, where no one could find her; and she would lie there listening to her name called in the darkness, Mary Mary free free free, by so many voices.

She shopped downtown with her mother at night for new school clothes, skirts not dresses, green ribbons for her dark hair, and shoes without buckles, like slippers a ballerina wears. And that night she tried them on for John, dancing in her nightgown, and he said you're

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growing up. And later her mother came into her room, only the little bed lamp was burning, and explained to her what growing up was like. And after her mother left, she picked up a little rag doll that was kept as an ornament on her dresser and tried to imagine having a child, really having a child, it coming out of her body, and she looked at herself in the mirror and stood close to it and looked at the colors of her eyes: brown around the edges and then turning a milky grey which seemed to be smoking behind crystal and toward the center the grey turning green, getting greener till it was almost violet near her pupils. And in the black mirror of her pupils she saw herself looking at herself.

The next day school started again and she was a sixth grader. John was in high school, and Albert Laska, who had grown much bigger over the summer and smoked, sneered at her and said, "Who'll protect you now?" She made a visit to the church at lunchtime and dropped a dime in the metal box by the ruby vigil lights and lit a candle high up on the rack with a long wax wick and said a prayer to the Blessed Virgin.

And it was late in October, and leaves wafted from the catalpa trees on their way to church on Sunday and fell like withered fans into the birdbaths turning the water brown. They were walking back from Mass, and she was thinking how little she saw John any more, how he no longer came to her room to talk, and she said, "Let's do something together."

"What?" he asked.

"Let's follow the Palatski Man."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I don't know," she said. "We could find out where he lives; where he makes his stuff. He won't come around pretty soon. Maybe we could go to his house in the winter and buy things from him."

John looked at her. Their hair was blowing about in the wind. "Alright," he said.

So they waited at a corner where a man was raking leaves into a pile to burn, but each time he built the pile and turned to scrape a few more leaves from his small lawn, the wind blew and the leaves whirled off from the pile and sprayed out as if alive over their heads, and then the wind suddenly died, and they floated back about the raking man into the grass softly like wrinkled snow. And in a rush of leaves they closed their eyes against, the Palatski Man pushed by.

They let him go down the block. He wasn't hard to follow, he went so slow, stopping at corners for customers. They didn't have to sneak behind him because he never turned around. They followed him down the streets, and one street became another until they were out of their neighborhood, and the clothes

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the people wore became poorer and brighter. They went through the next parish, and there was less stopping because it was a poorer parish where more Mexicans lived, and the children yelled in Spanish, and they felt odd in their new Sunday clothes.

"Let's go back," John said.

But Mary thought there was something in his voice that wasn't sure, and she took his arm and mock-pleaded, "No-o-o-o, this is fun, let's see where he goes."

He went up the streets past the trucking lots full of semis without cabs, where the wind blew more grit and dirty papers than leaves, where he stopped hardly at all. Then past blocks of mesh-windowed factories shut down for Sunday and the streets empty and the pavements powdered with brown glass from broken beer bottles. They walked hand in hand a block behind the white, bent figure of the Palatski Man pushing his cart over the cracked, fissured sidewalks. When he crossed a street and looked from side to side for traffic, they jumped into doorways afraid he might turn around.

He crossed Western Avenue, which was a big street and so looked emptier than any of the others without any traffic on it. They followed him down Western Avenue over the rivet-studded, aluminum-girdered bridge that spanned the river, watching the pigeons flitting through the cables. Just past the bridge he turned into a pitted asphalt road that trucks used hauling their cargoes to freight trains. It wound into the acres of endless lots and railroad yards behind the factories along the river.

John stopped. "We can't go any further," he said.

"Why," she asked, "it's getting interesting."

"I've been here before," he said.

"When?"

"I don't remember, but I feel like I've been here before."

"Com'on, silly," she said and tugged his arm with all her might and opened her eyes very wide, and John let himself be tugged along, and they both started laughing. But by now the Palatski Man had disappeared around a curve in the road, and they had to run to catch up. When they turned the bend, they just caught sight of him going over a hill, and the asphalt road they had to run up had turned to cinder. At the top of the hill Mary cried, "Look!" and pointed off to the left along the river. They saw a wheat field in the center of the city, with the wheat blowing and waving, and the Palatski Man, half man and half willowy grain, was pushing his cart through the field past a scarecrow with his straw arms outstretched and huge black crows perched on them.

"It looks like he's hanging on a cross," Mary said.

"Let's go," John said, and she thought he meant turn back home

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and was ready to agree because his voice sounded so determined, but he moved forward instead to follow the Palatski Man.

"Where can he be going," Mary said.

But John just looked at her and put his finger to his lips. They followed single file down a trail trod smooth and twisting through the wheat field. When they passed the scarecrow, the crows flapped off in great iridescent flutters, cawing at them while the scarecrow hung as if guarding a field of wings. Then at the edge of the field the cinder path resumed sloping downhill towards the river.

John pointed and said, "The mounds of coal."

And she saw three black mounds rising up in the distance and sparkling in the sun.

"Com'on," John said, "we have to get off the path."

He led her down the slope into the weeds that blended with the river grasses, rushes, and cattails. They snuck through the weeds, which seemed to pull at her dress and scratched her legs. John led the way; he seemed to know where he was going. He got down on his hands and knees and motioned for her to do the same, and they crawled forward without making a sound. Then John lay flat on his stomach, and she crawled beside him and flattened out, and he reached before them and parted the weeds, and she looked out and saw a group of men standing before a fire and dressed in a strange assortment of ill-fitting suits, either too small or too large and baggy. None of them matched, the trousers blue and the suitcoat brown, striped pants and checked coats, countless combinations of colors. They wore crushed hats of all varieties: bowlers, straws, Stetsons, derbies, Homburgs. Their ties were the strangest of all, misshapen and dangling to their knees in wild designs of flowers, swirls, and polka dots.

"Who are they?" she whispered.

"The Ragmen," John hissed, "they must be dressed for Sunday."

And then she noticed the shacks behind the men, with the empty wagons parked in front and the stacks of junk from uprooted basements and strewn attics, even the gutted factory just the way John had described it. She saw the dogs suddenly jump up barking and whining, and all the men by the fire turn around as the Palatski Man wheeled his cart into their midst.

He gestured to them, and they all parted as he walked to the fire where he stood staring into the huge black pot. He turned and said something to one of them, and the man began to stir whatever was in the pot, and then the Palatski Man dipped a small ladle into it and raised it up, letting its contents pour back into the pot, and Mary felt herself get dizzy and gasp as the bright red fluid ran back in the sun, and she heard John exclaim,

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"Blood!" And she didn't want to see any more, how the men came to the pot and dipped their fingers in it and licked them off nodding and smiling. She saw the horses filing out of their barn, looking ponderous and naked without their harnesses. She hid her face in her arms and wouldn't look, and then she heard the slow, sorrowful chanting and off-key wheezing behind it. And she looked up and realized all the Ragmen, like a choir of bums, had removed their crushed hats and stood bareheaded in the wind, singing. Among them someone worked a dilapidated accordion, squeezing out a mournful, foreign melody. In their center stood the Palatski Man, leading them with his arms like a conductor and sometimes intoning a word that all would echo in a chant. Their songs rose and fell but always rose again, sometimes nasal, then shifting into a mass, rich baritone, building always louder and louder, more sorrowful, until the Palatski Man rang his bell and suddenly everything was silent. Not men or dogs or accordion or birds or crickets or wind made a sound. Only her breathing and a far-off throb that she seemed to feel more than hear, like all the church bells in the city were tolling an hour. The sun was in the center of the sky. Directly below it stood the Palatski Man raising a palatski.

The Ragmen had all knelt down. They rose up and started a procession leading to where they hid in the grass. Then John was up and yelling, "Run!" and she scrambled to her feet, John dragging her by the arm. She tried to run but her legs wouldn't obey her. They were so rubbery pumping through the weeds and John pulling her faster than she could go with the weeds tripping her and the vines clinging like fingers around her ankles.

Ragmen rose up in front of them and they stopped and ran the other way but Ragmen were there too. They were everywhere in an embracing circle, so they stopped and stood facing them, still holding hands.

"Don't be afraid," John told her.

And she wasn't. Her legs wouldn't move and she didn't care. She just didn't want to run any more, choking at the acrid smell of the polluted river for air. Through numbness she heard John's small voice lost over and over in the open daylight repeating, "We weren't doin' anything."

The Ragmen took them back to where the Palatski Man stood before the fire and the bubbling pot. John started to say something but stopped when the Palatski Man raised his finger to his lips. One of the Ragmen brought a bushel of shiny apples and another a handful of pointed little sticks. The Palatski Man took an apple and inserted the stick and dipped it into the pot and took it out coated with red. The red crystallized in the sun and turned hard, and suddenly she realized it

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was a red candy apple that he was handing her. She took it from his hand and held it dumbly while he made another for John and another for himself. He bit into his and motioned for them to do the same. She looked up at John standing beside her, flushed and sweated, and she bit into her apple. It was sweeter than anything she ever tasted, with the red candy crunching in her mouth, melting mingling with apple juice.

And then he took a giant palatski, ten times bigger than any she had ever seen, and broke it again and again, handing the tiny bits to the circle of Ragmen, where they were passed from mouth to mouth. When there was only a morsel left, he broke it three ways and offered a piece to John. She saw it disappear in John's hand and watched him raise his hand to his mouth and at the same time felt him squeeze her hand very hard. The Palatski Man handed her a part. Honey stretched into threads from its torn edges. She put it in her mouth, expecting the crisp wafer and honey taste, but it was so bitter it brought tears to her eyes. She fought them back and swallowed, trying not to screw up her face, not knowing whether he had tricked her or given her a gift she didn't understand. He spoke quietly to one of the Ragmen in a language she couldn't follow and pointed to an enormous pile of rags beside a nearby shack. The man trudged to the pile and began sorting through it and returned with a white ribbon, spotlessly clean, of immaculate shining silk. The Palatski Man gave it to her, then turned and walked away, disappearing into the shack. As soon as he was gone, the circle of Ragmen broke and they trudged away, leaving the children standing dazed before the fire.

"Let's get out of here," John said. They turned and began walking slowly, afraid the Ragmen would regroup at any second, but no one paid any attention to them. They walked away. Back through the wheat field past silently perched crows, over the hill, down the cinder path that curved and became the pitted asphalt road. They walked over the Western Avenue bridge that shook as a green trolley, empty with Sunday, clattered across it. They stopped in the middle of the bridge, and John opened his hand, and she saw the piece of palatski crushed into a little sour ball, dirty and pasty with sweat.

"Did you eat yours?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"I tried to stop you," he said. "Didn't you feel me squeezing your hand. It might have been poisoned."

"No," she lied, so he wouldn't worry, "it tasted fine."

"Nobody believed me," John said.

"I believed you."

"They'll see now."

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And then he gently took the ribbon that she still unconsciously held in her hand—she had an impulse to clench her fist but didn't—and before she could say anything, he threw it over the railing into the river. They watched it caught in the drafts of wind under the bridge, dipping and gliding among the wheeling pigeons, finally touching the green water and flowing away.

"You don't want the folks to see that," John said. "They'd get all excited and nothing happened, I mean nothing really happened, we're both alright."

"Yes," she said. They looked at each other. Sunlight flashing through the girders made them squint, flashing from the slits of eyes and off the river when their gaze dropped. Wind swooped over the railing and tangled their hair.

"You're the best girl I ever knew," John told her.

They both began to laugh so hard they almost cried, and John stammered out, "We're late for dinner, I bet we're gonna really get it," and they hurried home.

They were sent to bed early that night without being permitted to watch TV. She undressed and put on her nightgown and climbed under her covers, feeling the sad, hollow Sunday-night feeling when the next morning will be Monday and the weekend is dying. The feeling always reminded her of all the past Sunday nights when she had had it and then of all the future Sunday nights when it would come again. She wished John could come into her room so they could talk. She lay in bed tossing and seeking the cool places under her pillow with her arms and in the nooks of her blanket with her toes. She listened to the whole house go to sleep: the TV shut off after the late news—heard the voices of her parents discussing whether the doors were locked for the night. She felt herself drifting to sleep and tried to think her nightly prayer, the Hail Mary before she slept, but it turned into a half dream which she woke out of with a faint recollection of Gabriel's wings, and she lay staring at the familiar shapes of furniture in her dark room. She heard the wind outside like a low whinny answered by cats. At last she climbed out of her bed and looked out the lace-curtained window. Across her backyard over the catalpa tree the moon hung low in the cold sky like a giant palatski snagged in the twigs. And then she heard the faint tinkle of the bell.

He stood staring up, the moonlike silver eyeballs shining in the centers of his dark glasses. His horse, a windy white stallion, stamped and snorted behind him, and a gust of leaves funneled along the ground and swirled through the street light, and some of them stuck in his tangled mane while his hooves kicked sparks in the dark alley. He offered her a palatski.

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She ran from the window to the mirror and looked at herself in the dark, feeling her teeth growing and hair pushing through her skin in the tender parts of her body that had been bare and her breasts swelling like apples from her flat chest and her blood burning, and then in a lapse of wind when the leaves fell back to earth, she heard his gold bell jangle again like silver and knew that it was time to go.

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THIS MONTH'S COVER is by Ron Walotsky, whose work has appeared here regularly since 1967. Ron's paintings were recently included in an exhibition in New York that the *N. Y. Times* art critic called, "an event of uncommon interest. I would rank it far higher in general artistic quality than the shows currently at the Whitney Museum or the Guggenheim Museum." And, specifically about Ron's work: "Another highly accomplished painter, Ron Walotsky, was entirely unknown to me before the present occasion. Each of his pictures is an entirely individual conception. What unites them into a consistent stylistic statement is the character of their color and the means used to realize it—a very romantic, slightly unearthly, slightly psychedelic color achieved through painstaking gradations of light. There is at once an almost electric quality to the color in Mr. Walotsky's paintings, and a dreamlike quality to the atmosphere they evoke."

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Bill and I

I AM, AS IT HAPPENS, DOING A BOOK ON Lord Byron's narrative poem "Don Juan."* The poem is an uninhibited satire in which Byron takes the opportunity to lash out at everything and everyone that displeased him. He is cruel to the point of sadism toward Britain's monarchs, toward its poet laureate, toward its greatest general, and so on.

But those for whom he reserves his most savage sallies are his critics. Byron did not take to criticism kindly, and he invariably struck back.

Now as far as I know, there is no such thing as a writer who takes to criticism kindly. Most of us, however, affect stoic unconcern and bleed in private.

For myself, alas, stoic unconcern is impossible. My frank and ingenuous countenance is a blank page on which my every emotion is clearly written (I am told), and I don't think I have ever succeeded in playing the stoic for even half a second. Indeed, when I am criticized unfairly, everyone within earshot knows that I have been—and for as much as hours at a time.

Naturally, when I recently published a two-volume book entitled ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE,† I tried to steel myself for inevitable events. It was bound to get into the hand of an occasional Shakespearian scholar who would come all over faint at the thought of someone outside his field daring to invade the sacred precincts.

In fact, the very first review I received began: "What is Isaac Asimov, spinner of outer-space tales, doing—"

Because I want to, and because my publishers humor me.

†*Doubleday, N.Y., 1970, $12.50 each volume.*

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isaac asimov

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Naturally, I read no further. The fact that I am a spinner of outer-space tales is utterly irrelevant to this particular book and can only be mentioned because the reviewer thinks there is something vaguely (or not so vaguely) beneath literary dignity in being a science-fiction writer.

I have sought a printable response for that and failed, so I'll pass on.

A second review was much more interesting. It appeared in a Kentucky paper and was written by someone I will call Mr. X. It begins this way "Isaac Asimov is associate professor of biochemistry at Boston University, and a prolific writer in many fields. I have read several of his books on science with the greatest attention and respect."

So far, so good. I am delighted.

But then, a very little while later, he says: "In this book, however, he has left the sunlit paths of natural science for the treacherous bogs of literature—"

What he objects to, it seems, is that I have annotated the plays; explained all the historical, legendary and mythological references. It is a book of footnotes, so to speak, and he resents it. He points out that he thinks of "the language, the poetry, as the chief glory of Shakespeare's works."

Well, who doesn't? I'm delighted that Mr. X is clever enough to understand the language and the poetry without any explanation from me. And if *he* doesn't need it, why should anyone else, eh?

Notice, though, that he doesn't scorn to follow me along "the sunlit paths of natural science." Indeed, he reads my books on science "with the greatest attention and respect."

I'm glad he does, and I can only presume that he is grateful that I take the trouble to footnote science so that he can get a fugitive hint of its beauties.

Suppose, instead, I were to say to Mr. X, "The logarithm of two is a transcendental number; and, indeed, the logarithm of any number to any base is transcendental except where the number is equal to the base or to an exact power of that base."

Mr. X might then, with justification, say, "What is a transcendental number, a logarithm, and, in this case, a power and a base?"

In fact, if he were a really deep thinker, he might ask, "What is two?"

But suppose I answered then that my statement bore within it all the poetry and symmetry and beauty of mathematics ("Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare.") and that to try to explain it would simply hack it up. And if Mr. X found trouble in understanding it, too bad for him. He just wasn't as bright as I was, and he could go to blazes.

But I *don't* answer that way. I explain such matters and many more, and

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go to a lot of trouble to do so, and then he reads those explanations with "the greatest attention and respect."

Scientists generally recognize the importance of explaining science to the non-scientist. It is interesting, then, in a rather sad way, that there exist humanists who feel themselves to be proprietors of their field, who hug literature to themselves, who mumble "the language, the poetry," and who see no reason why it should be explained to anyone as long as they themselves can continue to sniff the ambrosia.

Let us take a specific case. In the last act of "The Merchant of Venice," Lorenzo and Jessica are enjoying an idyllic interlude at Portia's estate in Belmont, and Lorenzo says:

Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

I think this passage is beautiful, for I have as keen a sense of the beauty and poetry of words as Mr. X; perhaps (is it possible?) even keener.

But what happens if someone says: "What are patens?"

After all, it is not a very common word. Does it ruin the beauty of the passage to whisper in an aside, "Small disks.?"

Or what if someone asks, "What does he mean about these orbs singing like angels in their motion? What orbs? What motion? What singing?"

Am I to understand that the proper answer is, "No! Just listen to the words and the beautiful flow of language, and don't ask such Philistine questions."

Does it spoil the beauty of Shakespeare's language to understand what he is saying? Or can it be that there are humanists who, qualified though they may be in esthetics, know little of the history of science, and don't know what Bill is saying and would rather not be asked.

All right, then, let's use this as a test-case. I am going to explain this passage in far greater detail than I did in my book, just to show how much there is to consider in these beautiful syllables—

Anyone looking at the sky in a completely unsophisticated manner, without benefit of any astronomical training whatever, and willing to

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judge by appearances alone, is very likely to conclude that the Earth is covered by a smooth and flattened dome of some strong and solid material that is blue by day and black by night.

Under that solid dome is the air and the floating clouds. Above it, he may decide, is another world of gods and angels where the immortal souls of men will rise after the body dies and decays.

As a matter of fact, this is precisely the view of the early men of the Near East, for instance. On the second day of creation, says the Bible: "God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (Genesis 1:6-7).

The word "firmament" is from the Latin word "firmamentum," which means something solid and strong. This is a translation of the Greek word "stereoma," which means something solid and strong, and that is a translation of the original Hebrew word "raqia" which refers to a thin metallic bowl.

In the Biblical view there was water below the firmament (obviously) and water above it, too, to account for the rain. That is why, in the time of Noah's flood, it is recorded that ". . . the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened." (Genesis 7:11). The expression might be accepted as metaphor, of course, but I'm sure that the unsophisticated accepted it literally.

But there's no use laughing from the height of our own painfully gained hindsight. About 700 B.C., when the material of Genesis was being first collected, the thought that the sky was a solid vault with another world above it was a reasonable conclusion to come to from the evidence available.

What's more, it would seem reasonable about 700 B.C. to suppose that the firmament stretched over but a limited portion of a flat Earth. One could see it come down and join the Earth tightly at the horizon. Few people in ancient times ever travelled far from home and the world to them was but a few miles in every direction. Even soldiers and merchants, who tramped longer distances, might feel the Earth was larger than it looked but that the world to the enlarged horizon was still flat, and still enclosed on all sides by the junction of firmament and ground. (This was also very much the medieval view and probably that of many unsophisticated moderns.)

The Greek philosophers, however, had come to the conclusion, for a number of valid reasons, that the Earth was *not* a more or less flat object of rather limited size, but a spherical object of sufficient size to dwarf the

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known world to small dimensions.

The firmament, then, must stretch all around the globular Earth; and to do so symmetrically, it must be another, but much larger, sphere. The apparent flattening of the firmament overhead had to be an illusion (it is!), and the Greeks spoke of what we would call the "heavenly sphere" as opposed to the "terrestrial sphere."

None of this, however, altered the concept of the firmament (or heavenly sphere) as made up of something hard and firm. What, then, were the stars?

Naturally, the first thought was that the stars were exactly what they appeared to be: tiny, glowing disks embedded in the material of the firmament ("Look how the floor of heaven is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.")

The evidence in favor of this was that the stars did not fall down, as they would surely do if they were not firmly fixed to the heavenly sphere. Secondly, the stars moved about the Earth once every twenty-four hours, with the North Star as one pivot (the other being invisible behind the southern horizon), and did so all in one piece without altering their relative positions from night to night and from year to year.

If the stars were suspended freely somewhere between the heavenly sphere and the Earth, and for some reason did not fall, surely they would either not move at all or, if they did, would move independently. No, it made much more sense to suppose them all fixed to the heavenly sphere, and to suppose that it was the heavenly sphere that turned, carrying all the stars with itself.

But alas, this interpretation of the heavens—beautiful and austere! simple—did not account for everything.

As it happened, the Moon was clearly not imbedded in the heavenly sphere, for it did not maintain a fixed position relative to the stars. It was at a particular distance from a particular star one night, farther east the next night, still farther east the one afterward. It moved steadily west to east in such a way as to make a complete circuit of the starry sky in a little over 27 days.

The Sun moved from west to east, too, though much more slowly. Its motion couldn't be watched directly, of course, since no stars were visible in its neighborhood by which its position might be fixed. However, the night-time configuration of stars shifted from night to night because, clearly, the Sun moved and blotted out slightly different portions of the sky from day to day. In that manner it could be determined that the Sun seemed to make a circuit of the sky in a little over 365 days.

If the Sun and the Moon were the only bodies to be exceptional, this

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might not be too bad. After all, they were very much different from the stars and could not be expected to follow the same rules.

Thus, the Hebrews, in their creation myth, treated the Sun and Moon as special cases. On the fourth day of creation, "God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also" (Genesis 1:16).

It seems amusing to us today to have the stars dismissed in so off-handed a fashion, but it makes perfect sense in the light of the Hebrew knowledge of the day. The stars were all embedded in the firmament and they served only as a background against which the motions of the Sun and the Moon could be studied.

But then it turned out that certain of the brighter stars were also anomalous in their motions and shifted positions against the background of the other stars. In fact, their motion was even stranger than that of the Moon and the Sun, for, though they moved west-to-east most of the time as the Moon and the Sun did, they occasionally would turn about and move east-to-west. Very puzzling!

The Greeks called these stars "planetes," meaning "wanderers" as compared with the "fixed stars." The Greek word has become "planet" to us, and seven of them were recognized. These included the five bright stars which we now call Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, and, of course, the Sun and the Moon.

What to do with them? Well, like the stars, the planets did not fall, and like the stars, they moved about the Earth. Therefore, like the stars, they had to be embedded in a sphere. Since each of the seven planets moved at a different speed and in a different fashion, each had to have a separate sphere, one nested inside the other, and all nested inside the sphere of the stars.

Thus there arose the notion not of the heavenly sphere, but of the heavenly spheres, plural.

But there was only one heavenly sphere that could be seen—the blue sphere of the firmament. The fact that the other spheres were invisible was no argument, however, for their non-existence; merely for their transparency. They were sometimes called "the crystalline spheres" where the word "crystalline" was used in its older meaning as "transparent."

The Greeks then set about trying to calculate where the different spheres were pivoted and how they must turn in order to cause each planet to move in the precise fashion in which it was observed to move. Endless complications had to be added in order to match theory with observation, but for two thousand years the complicated theory of the crystalline spheres held good, not because men of thought were perversely

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stupid, but because nothing else so well fit the appearances.

Even when Copernicus suggested that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the Universe, he didn't abolish the spheres. He merely had them surrounding the Sun, with the Earth itself embedded in one of them. It was only with Johannes Kepler—

But never mind that. The details of the motions of the crystalline spheres don't concern us in this article. Let us instead consider an apparently simpler question: In what order are the spheres nested? If we were to travel outward from Earth, which sphere would we come to first, which next and so on.

The Greeks made the logical deduction that the closest sphere would be smallest and would therefore make a complete turn in the briefest time. Since the Moon made a complete circle against the stars in about four weeks (a far shorter time than any other planet managed to run the course), its sphere must be closest.

Arguing in this manner, the Greeks decided the next closest sphere was that of Mercury; then, in order, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. And finally, of course, there was the sphere of the stars.

And how far apart were the spheres and what were their actual distances from the Earth?

This, unfortunately, was beyond the Greeks. To be sure, the Greek astronomer, Hipparchus, about 150 B.C., used a perfectly valid method (after the still earlier astronomer, Aristarchus) for determining the distance of the Moon, and placed it at a distance of thirty times the Earth's diameter, which is correct, but the distance of no other heavenly body was determined with reasonable accuracy until the 17th Century.

Now the scene switches. About 520 B.C., the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras, was plucking strings, and found that he could evoke notes that harmonized well together, if he used strings whose lengths were simply related. One string might be twice the length of another; or three strings might have lengths that were in the ratios of 3:4:5.

The details are irrelevant, but to Pythagoras it seemed highly significant that there should be a connection between pleasing sounds and small whole numbers. It fit in with his rather mystical notion that everything in the Universe was related to simple ratios and numbers.

Those who followed in his footsteps after his death accentuated the mysticism, and it seemed to the Pythagoreans that they now had a way of deciding not only the how of planets, but the why as well. Since numbers governed the Universe, one ought to be able to deduce the way in which the Universe ought to be constructed.

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For instance, 10 was a perfect number. (Why? Well, for one thing, 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10 and this seems to have some mystical value.) In order, then, for the Universe to function well, it had to be composed of ten spheres.

Of course, there were only eight spheres, one for the stars and one for each of the seven planets, but that didn't stop the Pythagoreans. They decided that the Earth moved around some central fire of which the Sun was only a reflection, and worked up a reason for explaining why the central fire was invisible. That added a ninth sphere for the Earth. In addition, they imagined another planet on the opposite side of the central fire, a "counter-Earth." The counter-Earth kept pace with the Earth and stayed always beyond the central fire and was thus never seen. Its sphere was the tenth.

In addition, the Pythagoreans thought that the spheres were nested inside each other in such a way that their distances of separation bore simple ratios to one another and produced harmonious notes in their motion as a result (like the plucking of strings of simply related lengths). Originally, I imagine, the Pythagoreans may have advanced this notion of harmonious notes only as a metaphor to represent the simply related distances, but later mystics accepted the notes as literally existent. They became "the music of the spheres."

Of course, no one ever heard any music from the sky, so it had to be assumed to be inaudible to men on Earth. It is this notion that causes Shakespeare to speak of an orb that "in his motion like an angel sings" but with sounds that can be heard only in heaven. ("Such harmony is in immortal souls.") While men's souls are still draped in their earthly bodies, they are deaf to it ("whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it").

Well, then, does understanding Lorenzo's speech in terms of ancient astronomy spoil its beauty? Does it not seem that to understand him adds to the interest? Does it not remove the nagging question of "But what does it mean?" that otherwise distracts from an appreciation of the passage?

It may be, of course, that Mr. X is the kind who never asks "But what does it mean?" It may be that for him understanding is irrelevant. If so, he and I are not soulmates. It may even be that Mr. X is the kind of obscurantist who finds that understanding decreases beauty. If so, he and I are even less soulmates.

And yet, let me point out, that there is something in this very passage that could be of interest to Shakespearian scholars *if* they thoroughly understood what Shakespeare was talking about.

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As almost everyone knows, there are many who feel that Shakespeare did not write the plays attributed to him. They feel that someone else did, with the person most frequently credited being Francis Bacon, who was an almost exact contemporary of Shakespeare.

The argument very often heard is that Shakespeare was just a fellow from the provinces with very little education, and that he could not possibly have written so profoundly learned a set of plays. Bacon, on the other hand, was a great philosopher and one of the most intensely educated people of his time. Bacon, therefore, could easily have written the plays.

Shakespearian scholars, when they argue the matter at all, are forced to maintain that Shakespeare was much better educated than he is given credit for being and that therefore he was learned enough to write his plays. Since virtually nothing is known of Shakespeare's life, the argument will never be settled in that fashion.

Why not turn matters around, then, and argue that Bacon was *too* educated to write Shakespeare's plays; that there exist errors in the plays that Bacon could never possibly have made and that would just suit an insufficiently educated fellow from the sticks?

Consider Lorenzo's speech. Lorenzo is talking about the *stars;* these are the "patens of bright gold" with which "the floor of heaven is thick inlaid." Lorenzo (hence Shakespeare) seems to think that each star has a separate sphere and that each gives out its own note, ("There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st but in his motion like an angel sings").

Lest you think I'm misinterpreting the speech, let's take a clearer case.

In Act II of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Oberon is reminding Puck

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of a time they listened to a mermaid who sang with such supernal beauty that

. . . the nude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea maid's music.

The use of the plural "spheres" shows again that Shakespeare thinks that each star has its separate sphere.

This is wrong. There is a sphere for each planet; one for the Earth itself, if you like; one for the counter-Earth; one for any imaginary planet you wish. However, all the ancient theories agreed that the "fixed stars" were all embedded in a single sphere.

To imagine separate spheres for each star, as Shakespeare does more than once in his plays, is to display a lack of knowledge of Greek astronomy. This is a lack of knowledge that Francis Bacon could not possibly have displayed; hence we might fairly argue that Francis Bacon could not possibly have written Shakespeare's plays.

Well, don't get me wrong. I don't want to imply that I received only bad reviews for my GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE. Actually, most of the reviews were quite complimentary and were an entire pleasure to read.

Just the same, I had better start preparing myself for the occasional review by the "outraged specialist" type that I will surely get when ASIMOV'S ANNOTATED "DON JUAN" is published.

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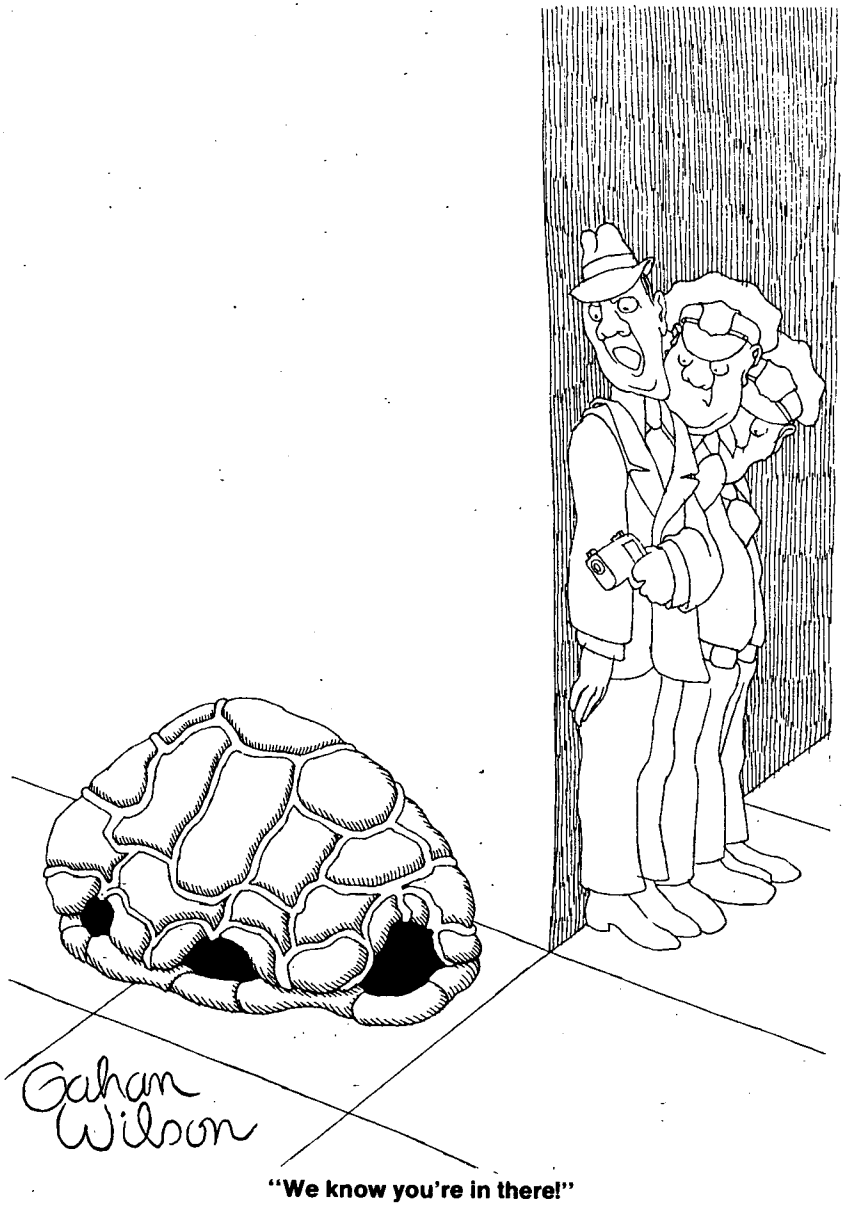

"We know you're in there!"

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Maureen Bryan Exter's last appearance here was with "The Good-bye Birthday," August 1970. The subject of the story below—a child with remarkable abilities and his effect on his classmates and teacher—is perhaps not one to leave you open-mouthed with astonishment, but it comes refreshingly alive under Mrs. Exter's sure direction.

New Boy

by MAUREEN BRYAN EXTER

I SAT IN FRONT OF THE CLASSROOM, looking over my group of thirty-nine fifth graders, who were, for the moment, writing industriously—all except one or two near the window who were daydreaming and staring out at the light rain. Especially one.

The thirty-nine blank report cards lay on the desk before me, demanding endless remarks to be made in lieu of the old nasty letter grades. This year we were using modern wonderful *individual* comments. That was the current key word—individualized instruction. Three out of four new teachers were not finding work; every teacher who did have a job also had far too many students, and the Powers Above wanted us to be individualized, in writing. The Powers were wildly inventive at creating new problems for middle-aged teachers.

The children were answering the silly questions in their reading book, which came after a story about a boy and his calf (which I had assigned more to calm them from their usual rainy-day jumpiness than for any educational reason), and I was just becoming satisfied that Donna was not passing her usual wrong answers to her closest

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friend Luanne, when a hand shot up. I winced when I saw who it was. "Yes, Johnny?" I said.

The blond boy had come out of his daydream and turned away from the window. "I can't do this work, Mrs. Emory," he said, innocently wide-eyed. "I don't have my book."

My industrious ants looked up, transformed instantly into slothful grasshoppers. Someone giggled. They had been working on their assignment for nearly twenty minutes, and Johnny had just discovered that he didn't have his book. Tee hee. Johnny was a new boy to the class, having only been with me for a few weeks. As one girl had confided breathlessly to me in the hall, he was *weird.* I pictured his report card hazily: "Johnny works well on his own terms."

I zapped the class with my special teachers' bad look, and they began to settle down again as I picked up my own book (which was not a teachers' edition, thanks to the fifth-grade teacher from the year before) and plunked it down before him, opening it to the story's first page with its picture of the insipid boy with his arms around the insipid calf. "Here you go," I recited pleasantly. "If you can't finish in the time remaining, I guess you'll have to stay after school."

There was about ten minutes to go before recess, and then we had our weekly visit by the district choral music teacher. I did not allow the children to work into recesses because I needed the time for my own grossly physical purposes.

"Thank you, Mrs. Emory," Johnny said. A moment later he had skimmed the story, which was about ten pages long. A moment after that his pencil was racing across the lined paper.

I already knew from experience that his work would be complete. It would also be correct and neat and well organized. What's more, it would be brilliant. His usual work employed metaphors, similes, zeugmas, historical references, analogies, puns which I did not always understand, and quotations in several languages. Although I had heard of child prodigies, I had never hoped to teach one—especially not in the same room with thirty-eight of his inferiors. Thirty-nine, counting me.

When the bell rang, the children were allowed to leave the room one row at a time, each putting his or her paper on the front desk of his or her row as he or she left. But Johnny lingered and brought me his paper personally.

"Yes, Johnny?" I said, accepting his paper and putting it down on the desk without looking at it.

"Mrs. Emory," he said, "have you ever thought of putting together a book for fifth-grade reading?"

"No," I answered, startled. "Not really. Why?"

"This book isn't any good." He

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set the book in front of me and leafed through it. "You can see here . . . and here . . . there are mistakes all through the book."

I stared at the page which was before me, the middle of an article dealing with American Indians. It was one of those awful essays which declares that when white men landed in North America, Indians met the boat. "Which mistake are you referring to on this page?" I asked finally, not seeing any.

"Here," he said, stabbing at a place with his finger. "In this part they're writing about the Sioux, but they call them Iroquois!"

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Anyway," Johnny said. "The book's awfully dull. Nobody likes it."

"It's what we've got," I said. "I can't say that I'm too fond of it myself, but it's bound to be changed someday."

"They'll probably just update it," Johnny said glumly. "They'll put in some racially mixed pictures, a story about a Mexican boy and his burro, and three more stars in the flag." He stopped. "*Two* more stars, I mean."

I paused then, torn between my craving for a cup of coffee and some adult conversation, and my curiosity about Johnny. "Does your father have some connection with the publishing business?" I asked, giving in to what killed the cat.

"No," he said. He straightened. "You should give thought to doing some writing—starting with a textbook. If you wrote a book, it would be superior."

"Thank you," I said, almost dismissing this as a normal compliment from a student who obviously liked me—but not quite. I stood up. "If you'll excuse me," I said. "I think I'd like a cup of coffee."

When Johnny left the room, I picked up his paper. I was just glancing at it when I got into the staff room. "Take a look at this," I said, handing it to Rosemary Putnam, who was sitting in the only armchair. I drew myself a cup of hot, chewy coffee and pulled up a folding chair near her, slipping off my shoes.

"Well, Little Mother," I said, referring to her most recent girth. "What do you think of that?"

She handed the paper back to me. "Is he a behavior problem?"

"He has the face and disposition of a perfect angel," I replied. "Really."

"Probably a latent hellion," Rosemary said. "Repressed. Seeking positive attention."

My secret, platonic, balding lover, Jim Abbott, pulled up a chair next to me just then and sat down. "Who isn't?" he said. "I'd like mine in terms of a bigger paycheck." He winked at me. "How's Dan's flu coming along?" he asked, referring to the latest issue of the Black Death which had attacked my husband.

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I sighed. "The flu's thriving, but Dan expects it to get bored with him any day now."

"Good," Jim said heartily. "Then you and I can run away together." He leered. "We'll blindfold the flu bug."

Rosemary didn't pay attention to Jim, who is fifteen years my junior and quite happily married to a girl that no one would describe as the least bit dumpy. "Is this student always so critical?" she asked soberly.

"What's that?" Jim asked me.

"A new boy." I turned to Rosemary. "He's not really being critical," I said quickly. "I mean, sure, he thinks the questions after the story are silly, but so do I. And he does suggest New English word games as having the same effect of calming down children during the rains."

Jim frowned. "Here—let me see that." I handed him Johnny's paper, and he read silently. He looked up at me after a moment, his eyes questioning. "Piaget? He quotes Piaget?"

"Be grateful it isn't in French," I said tiredly.

He read on. "Huh," he said finally. "*I* haven't even read all this stuff."

"What's in his cum folder?" Rosemary asked. "Anything interesting?"

"He's been here a month," I said. "The secretary's written two letters to his old school district, but nothing's arrived. However, I've reason to believe that he's intelligent."

"What about the papers they filled out when he entered?" Jim asked. "What do his parents do?"

"His father's self-employed," I answered. "His mother's a housewife. No sibs. No information. He didn't attend kindergarten or nursery school." I stopped. "One thing, though. He hasn't had any childhood illnesses."

"None?" Jim said incredulously.

"The secretary said the mother looked intelligent when she came in with him . . . and the mother said he'd never been sick except for a few normal instances of partial power failure." I stopped. "The secretary said she thought that was a joke."

"Nutrition," Rosemary said. "It's all nutrition. Kids today are stuffed with vitamins; so they're bigger and brighter and . . ."

"Who're his friends?" Jim asked curiously. "Does he have any friends?"

"What about girls?" Rosemary said.

"He gets along with most everybody. I don't think he notices girls as girls, but he doesn't dislike them." I paused. "He has one particular friend—they're usually together."

"Who?" Rosemary asked.

I sighed, knowing that her philosophy was that you could always know a great deal about a bird from his flock. "Dave Willems."

"Dave!" Rosemary asked.

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"Old Dave?" Jim said at the same time. I knew that the year before, he'd had Dave Willems in his fourth-grade class before apologetically passing him on to me. Then a look of recognition came into his face. "You're talking about the blond kid who goes around with Dave, right?"

"But why would an intelligent boy . . ." Rosemary started.

"They're very good friends," I said. "Johnny forgot his lunch on his first day here, and Dave gave him a peanut butter sandwich, and they've been inseparable ever since."

"There's nothing wrong with Dave," Jim said loyally. "After all, he's perfectly nice." He looked at me expectantly.

I nodded. "I know. He's just dumb."

"They probably have a perfectly satisfactory inferior-superior relationship," Rosemary said thoughtfully. "Johnny lectures, and Dave says 'duh'."

"They seem more friendly than that," I said. "I don't think Johnny looks down on Dave."

"Why not?" Rosemary said. "*I* do." The break was just ending; so we all stood up and started rinsing out our cups. "Look," she said at the sink. "I had that kid in the third grade twice. I'm not prejudiced against inferior hamburger, mind you, but T-bone steak is much nicer."

As on most rainy days, the halls were crowded with children when we inched out of the staff room. Johnny and Dave Willems were standing near the classroom door, talking and laughing. Dave's bulky tallness almost hid the slighter Johnny, since Dave, of course, was somewhat overage for the fifth grade. His thick glasses shown in the hall lights like the bottoms of Coke bottles, and, as I watched, he dropped the book he was holding. Dave was always dropping something, or falling, or walking into things. His eyes were quite bad, and his intelligence was worse, and, if we hadn't wanted to get him into high school so he could be trained, he would never have gotten to the fifth grade. Dave was classified as borderline MR, or EMR, or dumb, or uncoordinated, or what-have-you. He also wouldn't hurt a fly, and he was a rather sweet kid who came down with any disease that was going around and some that weren't. Many children had the erroneous impression that because he could not think clearly, he also could not be hurt.

All in all, even though it seemed a strange relationship, I was glad to see them together.

Other students in my class were getting back at the same time. I was just unlocking the door when Herb Harris ("works well under constant coercion") deliberately bumped into Dave, making him drop his book again.

"Sorry," Dave mumbled imme-

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diately. "Sorry, I should've watched where I was going."

It was strange to see the larger boy cringe from contact with the smaller one—or not so strange if you knew Herb Harris. Herb wasn't bad, mind you. Just evil. Privately I considered him my candidate for Most Likely to End Up on Death Row.

"Herb Harris!" I began my tirade. "I want you to apolo . . ."

But Herb wasn't listening. He wasn't *not* listening, either. I had vaguely noticed that when Herb collided with Dave, Johnny had straightened as though he might become physically involved in the situation. But he hadn't. Not in any obvious way.

What I saw was that he and Herb were looking directly into each other's eyes. Herb was standing absolutely still, the cruel grimace still on his face. Johnny seemed relaxed, although a bit angry. Then the bell rang. Johnny looked away, and the spell was broken.

Other students were watching, a silent group in comparison with the noisy children who were filing into rooms all down the hall. I turned the key and held open the door. When Herb came through, he was crying. No one had touched him—indeed, his crying sounded as if it came from emotional distress rather than physical pain—but he couldn't seem to stop.

Everyone in the room was silent. The only two who seemed to be acting at all naturally were Johnny and Dave, and even Dave seemed uneasy. All I could hear was Herb's steady sobbing.

I went up to his desk. "Would you like to go see the nurse?" I asked Herb quietly.

He just nodded and stood up again. I quickly scrawled a hall pass for him, and he left the room.

We all watched Herb leave. As the door closed slowly behind him, I could hear Dave's loud whisper: "Maybe you shouldn't have done that."

The music teacher was due to come in then, and I saw the tension dissolve as she brought out the first Christmas carols of November. After a few choruses of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," the most amazing thing I had ever seen was forgotten by everyone but me.

I wrote quietly at my desk while she lead the singing. While she was explaining some rounds she wanted them to do for the "Hi, Ho, Nobody Home" number, I surreptitiously went to Johnny's desk.

"What did you do to Herb?" I asked. He still hadn't come back.

Johnny's smile was very slight. "I just communicated to him how Dave felt—that's all. He'll be all right."

It was ESP, I told myself as I returned to my desk. Telepathy or metempsychosis or whatever they did at Duke University that I'd been meaning to look up since Bridey Murphy came back. Johnny

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had something very unusual by the tail. As I stared at the boy, his clear high voice blended with the voices of the rest of the class, and I wondered if his mother would let him go with me on a short field trip to Las Vegas and, if so, if I could sneak him into the casinos. The teachers' pension plan wasn't so good that a little something set aside would hurt.

The next period was physical education, when I took Jim Abbott's girls and he took my boys. He had always belabored the fact that after six years of college, he had been hired because he could handle boys' P.E., but when it came down to it, he's one of those fools who likes running up and down a mushy field with a whistle in his mouth.

It was field hockey season for the children, and they put all their appalling energies into the game, dashing around and laughing and trying to win so hard that you'd think they were paid.

Generally I found it astonishing that so few accidents happened, given those great running children and those huge crooked sticks.

Of course, that day something did. It was a big day for somethings happening.

The accident was not among my girls but among Mr. Abbott's boys. However, I witnessed it.

Johnny hurt a boy, a Gary Mussen who was in Mr. Abbott's class. I have no reason to think there was anything peculiar about the accident itself—I don't believe Johnny even knew the victim. But, very simply, Johnny and Gary were running in the same direction, close together. Johnny slipped, and when he fell, his stick went out and caught Gary's foot. When Gary fell, I knew at once that he hadn't fallen well because I could *hear* his arm break. It wasn't a very loud noise, but I was standing close by. Johnny froze as he lay there on the field looking at the other boy, whose arm hung down at a strange angle. Jim was running towards them—of course, I got there first, and I was telling Gary to stay still. Someone was sent for the nurse and also for the principal, who liked to be in on these things.

Gary wasn't crying; he looked more frightened than pained. I suppose I would have been frightened, too, if I found myself the center of attention of eight million children carrying sticks.

"Jesus Christ on a crutch," Jim was muttering. "They'll never settle down now." Then, more loudly to me, "Maybe you'd better move aside."

"Give him some air!" he yelled. "Come on—move it!"

I blew the whistle to indicate to my girls that I wanted them out there playing. Then I moved over to Johnny, who was more startled than I'd ever seen him. "I know it was an accident," I cooed soothingly. "No one's blaming you."

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Johnny scrambled up. "He's hurt, isn't he?" It wasn't a question.

"We've called the nurse," I said unnecessarily, since she was coming across the field with the principal a short distance behind. "But maybe it's just a strained muscle. He'll probably be fine in a few days."

Before I could stop him, he had gone over to Gary, who sat on the ground holding his arm. Jim Abbott was squatting next to him. "Hey," Johnny said, looking down at the boy. "I'm sorry."

"It was an accident," Gary said, blinking up at him. "It's okay."

Johnny stared at the arm for a minute, and then he walked back to me. "He'll be all right," he said.

"I imagine so," I said hesitantly. "And, if it does turn out to be a serious injury—don't blame yourself. The field was wet, and you slipped.

Again, that slight smile. "Really," Johnny said. "He'll be all right."

Flanked by the nurse and the principal, Gary was walking away towards the school. He was still holding his hurt arm, but my last glimpse of his face did not indicate that he was in much pain.

When I turned back to Johnny, he had gone back to talk with Dave.

That night after dinner I was sitting at home watching television and correcting papers when the telephone rang. My husband answered it. "For you," he said hoarsely. "Jim Abbott." He coughed a few times to remind me that he was too sick to be rising from the couch to answer my calls.

Another Union Hospitality Committee, I thought, taking the receiver from him. Another eight dozen doughnuts down the drain.

"Hello, love," I said.

"Hi, pet." Beneath Jim's cheerful tone, I felt he was hysterical.

"What's up?"

He took a deep, loud breath. "Remember our little accident this afternoon?"

"Actually," I said, "at my age I only remember things that happened last year." I paused. "What about it? Is Gary all right?"

"Gary's peachy keen," Jim said. "Gary's never been better. His mamma had him X-rayed, and you know what?"

"What?" I said, beginning to feel impatient.

"Old Gary doesn't have a broken arm or anything. But the X-ray man says he used to have a broken arm and that it healed beautifully."

"So what?"

"Gary's mamma says he's never broken a bone in his life."

I could tell what he was thinking. "Johnny's intelligent," I said. "He's not supernatural."

"Of course not," Jim said.

"He's a nice average bright boy. Chances are that Gary broke his arm once and didn't know about it."

"In three places?"

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I sighed. "Maybe it happened *in utero.*"

"I didn't have a tough time like that before I was born, did you?"

"My parents didn't get along that well," I said. "Look, do you have any logical explanations?"

"Sure," Jim said. "Johnny's a man from Mars—*boy* from Mars, excuse me."

"Why can't Gary be the one from Mars? He's the one who heals quickly."

"I've taught three of his brothers. Martians don't settle for that long—everybody knows that. And Johnny's new. Besides, you were saying today that . . ."

"Never mind what I was saying," I said. "I like the logical type of explantation."

"Me too," Jim said. "Honest." He laughed. "But you tell Johnny that if he ever decides to take on religion, I know a bunch of Baptists who'd love to get ahold of him."

"Martians," I said with dignity, "are not Baptists."

"Why not? They have canals, haven't they?"

"Good-by, Jim. I have seventy-eight sets of level tests to correct."

I hung up on Jim Abbott, who was singing "Rock of Ages" in an off-tone baritone.

"Really!" I exclaimed to my husband, who has a nice honest office job.

He looked away from the television momentarily. "Really what?"

"Really, some people!"

"What's Jim Abbott up to?"

"He thinks one of my students is strange." Briefly I explained the situation to him. After the first few minutes he turned off the television and gave me his full attention. He also read the latest paper Johnny had turned in. "Well," I said when I was through. "What do you think?"

"I think he's gifted," my husband said carefully.

I nodded. "That he is. He's also self-actuating and fully functioning." I smiled at him weakly. "That's jargon. It labels, but it doesn't explain very much."

"All right," my husband said slowly. "I also think that some people may be quicker to come to conclusions about what they don't understand than they should be."

"I don't think he's a Martian!" I exploded.

"Do you think he's normal?"

"He's not average," I said.

"No—but is he normal?"

"He's very nice," I said. "He's concerned. He's interested in people." I looked at my husband accusingly. "You're no help, you know."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what any red-blooded teacher with a suspected Martian in her class would do," I declared.

"And what's that?" my husband asked, flicking on the television again.

"Call a parent-teacher conference."

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If I haven't mentioned it before, Johnny's full name was John Smith. His mother was Mary Smith, wife of John Smith the First.

I'm not sure what I expected her to look like, since the near-sighted secretary who had processed Johnny's entrance papers said she looked like "a mother" . . . but somehow I didn't expect her to have much imagination.

The Smiths didn't have a telephone; so I had Johnny carry home a note along with his report card, requesting an interview as soon as possible. I did not indicate in my communique that I found anything wrong with Johnny but merely that I found him exceptional and that I would like very much to meet one or both of his parents so that we could discuss him.

The reply came back the next day with the report card, which was unsigned. Mrs. Smith wrote that she would be happy to meet with me at school, and would Friday be convenient? I replied that it would be.

Jim Abbott of course was hanging onto every detail of Johnny's life by then. I refused to have the boy specially tested, since to do so would be to indicate that he was exceptional, and he was exceptional enough not to point him out further. Besides, there were still hopes that the cum folder would be forwarded up and we would have sufficient information to assign all sorts of verbal and nonverbal scores to him. And, also, I'd been teaching long enough to know that the standard tests only complicated life.

As it was, on Friday afternoon Jim Abbott lounged lazily around the front office, waiting for "Mrs. John Smith" to come in. ("I'll just peek at her," he assured me. "She won't even know I'm there.")

Usually, when a parent visits, we are notified by a secretary coming into our room to announce his or her presence. After school is the general time when such appointments are arranged, and it hardly makes sense to waste good preparation time sitting in the office oneself for what might turn out to be a no-show.

But Jim Abbott was the one who told me. He came in giggling. "Hey," he said. "She's here."

I stood and closed my notebook. "Mrs. Smith?"

"Want to know who she looks like?" he asked.

"I would suspect," I said dryly, "that she looks like Mrs. Mary Smith."

"Take another guess," he said. "Go on."

"Mia Farrow," I said.

"Older," he said. "Somewhat older."

"Eleanor Roosevelt."

"Hey—not bad. You're close, but the age is between those two."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" I said. Then I left the classroom, only going into the office when I was sure Jim had left my room.

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It was true. Mrs. Smith looked like a very famous person whom we all used to worship and love before she remarried rich. The resemblance was striking. In fact, the two secretaries in the office were staring at her, including the one who had to squint, and even the vice principal was leaning out of his office door to take a look at her. She was perfectly coiffured, perfectly made up, perfectly groomed. She seemed perfectly unperturbed.

"Mrs. Smith?" I said unnecessarily. She turned. "I'm Mrs. Emory. Perhaps we could go to my room and talk."

"That will be fine," she said in a familiar soft voice—or as familiar as four words and a good imagination would allow. "Thank you."

I shut the door behind us when we entered the room, aware that Jim Abbott would soon probably have his ear to it, and then I offered Mrs. Smith a chair.

"I've been wanting to meet Johnny's mother," I said, sitting down behind my desk where I'd feel protected. "He's quite a boy."

"Yes," Mrs. Smith said. "I'm quite fond of him."

"Is he your only child?" I asked, quite aware that the entrance form listed him that way.

Mrs. Smith had the same sort of slight smile that Johnny had on occasion. "I was very lucky to be allowed to have him."

Although she had no trace of an accent, I soon became convinced that she was speaking a foreign language. "Well," I said, "he's quite a boy."

"Yes," she said. "He's the best I could have."

"I certainly have to agree with that," I said. The conversation was an awkward one, as were many with parents. "Might I ask where you're from?" I said finally. "My impression is that you have a slight accent."

"Oh," she said. "I'm from here."

"Here? Here in town?"

She shook her head. "Fairly nearby."

"Was Johnny born nearby?" That item on his form had gone unanswered.

"Reasonably nearby."

"He's very intelligent, you know," I said, wishing for brilliance.

"Yes."

"Sometimes he seems to show almost superhuman mental powers." I laughed then, to show that I didn't really believe this.

"Oh, no," she said. "His powers are entirely human."

"Will you be settling down here?" I asked, deflated.

She sighed. "When my work here is finished, we'll be leaving. I doubt that Johnny will be here for too much longer."

"That's a shame," I said sincerely. "I've gotten to like Johnny quite a bit." I paused. "Is there a chance you'll be living in a city for any length of time?"

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"There's very little chance of anything else," she answered.

"You should really try to get him into an established program for gifted children. I know we're supposed to have one here, but it's largely on paper. If we recommend an extra book for an intelligent child, we officially have a gifted children's program. But in some cities, tremendous work is being done. . . ."

She nodded. "Thank you. I don't believe Johnny is extraordinary in any way, but perhaps I will have him examined someday. However, I've always taught him at home, and it is doubtful that he would want to attend a public school, no matter how gifted he is. The freedom allowed a child in a school and the attention given to him can never rival what he can find in a proper home."

"But, of course, children do have to attend school," I began.

Her expression didn't change. "Do they?" I didn't answer her. "I thought it would be interesting for Johnny to meet some children. And he did so want to see you at work."

Clearly this wasn't getting us anywhere, although I was beginning to feel that I should go to the library and see if I'd ever written anything in my sleep. I rose to end the interview. "By the way," I said, "did anyone ever tell you that you look remarkably like. . . ."

"No," she said. "Never." Then she looked into my eyes, and from somewhere deep inside me she brought out a feeling of total tranquillity of the sort teachers get near the middle of June. She was thanking me—I'm sure of that now.

I gasped. "He will do well then, won't he?" I said.

"He will do well," she said solemnly. Then she was gone.

I sat down at my desk. A moment later Jim Abbott was inside, staring at me. "Well," he said impatiently, "what's she like?"

"Quite," I said, dazed. "Entirely."

"Grand. And how are Caroline and John-John?"

I began to regain my composure. "Did you really see a resemblance?"

"Sure," he said. "Didn't you?"

I shrugged. "Some. However, I found her to be an intelligent, concerned parent. Would you really expect Johnny's mother to be otherwise?"

"How many heads did she have?" he asked suspiciously.

"I forget—either seven or eight. One of them yodeled on the half hour."

"Humph," he said.

I beamed at him. "And, oh, yes, she said to tell you there aren't really canals on Mars. Those lines are really advertising."

Suddenly my head hurt terribly, and the giddy feeling of utter peacefulness had shattered. I stood, almost falling.

Jim caught me. "Are you sick?

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Can I take you home?" he asked.

"Johnny's in trouble," I said.

He stared at me. "Eh?"

"Johnny's in trouble," I repeated. "He's being hurt, and he's calling."

"Calling you?"

"Just calling."

The call was SOS and Mayday and three bonfires in a triangle and intense pressure. I found myself hurrying out of the school, closely followed by Jim Abbott.

"Do we take my car?" he stammered. "Or is where we're going near enough to walk?"

The pain was immense, blocking out everything else. There was nothing in the world except Johnny's scream of distress. "The car!" I gasped.

He opened the door nervously and we both got in. "Do you still hear him?" he asked as I gave him directions.

I didn't answer. Johnny seemed to be trying to regain control, although he was surrounded by sharp objects and hatred. Herb Harris was there—I was fairly sure of that. Herb Harris and pain.

We drove out of town, the pain becoming stronger along with the wish—no, the compulsion—to get to him as quickly as possible. "Don't you think his parents should be the ones to help him?" Jim asked once.

But the need to help him was overwhelming.

Soon the houses and trees had changed into just trees.

The Smiths had a rural address, I knew, but I had never paid much attention to it. "Stop!" I called suddenly.

Jim hit the brakes so suddenly that we just missed going through the windows. I slammed out of the door and out into a ditch before Jim could follow, but soon he was by my side.

Dave Willems lay sobbing in the dry ditch, his thick glasses broken next to him. I scrambled down next to him. His nose was bloody and his eye was bruised, but otherwise he looked all right. "It's Mrs. Emory," I said, knowing he probably couldn't see me too well. "I'm here."

"They got Johnny," Dave choked. "I tried to stop them, but they broke my glasses. They're going to make him do magic."

"Who's got him?" Jim demanded.

"Herb and Frank and some others I don't know." Tears rolled off the large boy's cheeks. "Only . . . Johnny can't do magic. He can only think hard. But they're going to hurt him. They put something over his eyes."

"Can you walk?" Jim asked.

Then . . . my head took over for me.

I stole Jim Abbot's car. I just left him and Dave in the ditch. The motor was still running, so I suppose it was easy. Perhaps that's one of the attractions of stealing cars—the big metal things almost purr their own invitations.

I knew where I was going as well

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as I knew anything in my life. Johnny was in trouble. There was fire in it now and cruel laughter.

Then, suddenly, I knew that Johnny was not alone with his enemies. I had a feeling that a superior force was with him—and that force was angry.

The pain in my head gave way to impressions of screams and terror which were somehow pleasing. And then . . . nothing. The call had ended.

I suppose that this is the time I would have turned around, if I had not run into a wall of light and perished.

In my own defense I should say that I am not a typical woman driver, as some have enjoyed labeling some women who drive. My driving record is unblemished. However, I was driving rather fast, under duress, on that country road, and I did not expect a wall of light or any other wall to appear in my path. So I believe that I have some excuse.

My death was painless. The last impression I have from that time is one of acute surprise and, at the very last split moment, of a sense of mourning for my own death.

I have an impression of seeing the twisted hulk which was the car and also of a glimpse of the twisted hulk that was me. But it seemed that my "essence," for lack of a better word, was kept at a distance throughout the following proceedings.

I felt very light during the time my body was repaired, in the same way that one is weightless in a dream. However, there were several bodies with mine on the floor of the house of light where we were. (Out of habit, I must refer to the downward area as a floor, although it was certainly not a common, solid, garden variety of floor.) All of the bodies belonged to young boys who were in far better shape than I was. Herb Harris was the only one I recognized. But they were fixed there rigidly like butterflies on an invisible board, each of them with his head in a twinkling haze of light. Although I'm not sure why, my impression is that the boys had their heads open or else that the inner clockworks of their heads were accessible in some neater, unopened way. My own body was there, entirely bathed in light. Swirling lights circled the area.

The larger light seemed disapproving but busy; the smaller one was apologetic.

"She understands," the larger light said. "Take care what you convey." (They weren't talking, of course—I translated what I picked up into words.)

The smaller light was Johnny. "Can she be mended?"

"Look and see," the big light said. Then, "Yes, it will be all right. But you should have left the road immediately. You broke her, so you can put her together again."

Uncertainly the smaller light flut-

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tered over my deceased form, rearranging and unmashing the shape. The larger light stayed with the bodies of the four boys.

Finally my wrinkled corpse was whole again. "I think we can put her inside now," the smaller light said.

The parent light conveyed a grunt and came over, touching here and there lightly. "It's a good job," it said begrudgingly. "You can dress her." The larger light—I'm sure it was Johnny's parent—came over to me. "Your vehicle has been repaired, and I can only trust that you are sane enough to find an explanation for this by yourself. You certainly will not believe it."

"Where are you from?" I tried to ask, but the only impression was that of more light in another place. And, without willing the question. "Why did you appear at the school as you did?"

The large light burst into several smaller lights which bounced about merrily and then rejoined itself. "I knew you'd enjoy that," the light said finally. "I've read some of your books myself."

I felt myself inexorably drawn to my body and then becoming sleepy as I entered effortlessly into it.

The larger light left me. "You will have to leave the school at once, of course," it said to the smaller light.

There was a pause. Then, just before I slept, the smaller light asked, "Can I give Dave a present?"

I didn't hear the reply.

After what seemed eight good hours of sleep, I found myself driving in Jim Abbott's car towards town. I felt that I had always been driving, that I had been under some sort of illusion which comes with maturity and shifting hormones, and that everything was right with the world.

Somehow it even seemed perfectly natural that I should come upon Jim and Dave Willems hitchhiking on the road, and, then, that I should slide over to let Jim drive without giving any explanation no matter how much he glared at me. In the back seat Dave was composed but dusty and blinking without his glasses. Neither of us spoke. In fact, if I had bothered to think about it, I would have wondered if Dave was sharing my haze of tranquillity.

First we dropped Dave off at his home and Jim went in with him for a few minutes to have a few explanatory words with Dave's widowed mother.

"What did you say to her?" I asked him when he came back to the car.

He got in and started the car, having carefully taken the keys with him when he left with Dave. "I said some boys were picking on him and a friend of his." He frowned. "She wasn't too worried about that—it happens all the time. But his glasses . . . that's something else. She said there's no money for

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another pair and the county takes time."

"Too bad Johnny can't come up with new glasses as his gift," I said thoughtfully.

Jim glanced at me. "Eh?"

"Johnny said he wanted to give Dave a present, since he has to leave."

"You actually saw Johnny then?"

I sat there uncomfortably, aware that I had said too much. "I don't think I want to answer that yet," I said finally.

"All I asked was whether you'd seen Johnny."

"I need time to come up with a rational explanation," I said miserably. "Don't push me."

"I wouldn't think of prying," Jim said stiffly. "In fact, I may not even prosecute you for auto theft since you came back so quickly—especially since you filled the tank."

"But I didn't . . ." I stopped, aware that Jim was staring at me. "Maybe you'd better watch the road."

He looked around in time to miss a passing taxi. "Just one thing I'd like to know," he said a moment later.

"Yes?"

"Is he a Martian?"

I thought for a minute. "No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." And I was sure.

Jim's face relaxed. "Good. I could never stand Martians."

This, I suppose, should have been the end of it, especially when Johnny actually didn't show up again. There was nothing particularly unusual, of course, about a child leaving the area with his parents without giving prior notice . . . although generally the better educated variety of parent does drop a few hints first. Nevertheless, I managed to assimilate his disappearance without difficulty and even to account for my own temporary insanity by ascribing it to "that time of life." Some grow mustaches and some hallucinate. It was all very simple.

But it wasn't the end. Even Herb Harris becoming a model citizen in class wasn't the end.

The end concerned Dave.

For the first couple of days after Johnny left, Dave was subdued, sitting in class mournfully and staring straight ahead (which was hardly surprising considering that he had no glasses—what *was* surprising, was that he had managed to find the school at all). Then, on that next Friday we had our weekly spelling test.

Dave got 14 words out of 20. 14 correct, that is. Dave normally got 18 or more—*in*correct.

At first, when I saw the test paper, I came to the logical conclusion that Dave had finally discovered cheating.

But Dave couldn't see. Without his glasses he couldn't see to study for the test; he couldn't see to write the test, and he most certainly

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couldn't see well enough to cheat.

I didn't get around to correcting the spelling tests until after school on Friday, after all the children had gone home. So I had the weekend to stew about Dave's test score.

But on Monday I called him to my desk as soon as I had started the rest of the class reading the new social studies chapter.

"Read this to me," I said, handing him a union pamphlet from my mailbox, part of the junk mail that had arrived that morning.

He read the title ("Should We Strike?") and the first two paragraphs aloud to me, at first haltingly and then picking up confidence. He held the pamphlet a normal distance from his face.

I took it from his hands, "That's fine," I said, nodding approvingly.

He stood there, waiting.

"Could you tell me what you read in your own words?"

Dave swallowed. "Well, it says the teachers pay a lot towards pensions but don't get much back." He stopped. "Are you really going on strike?"

"We're hoping just to make very loud threats," I said. I paused. "How long have you been able to read this well?" I asked casually.

"Since I broke my glasses, I guess," Dave answered slowly. "Since Johnny left. I don't know why. It just isn't hard any more."

"Your work is improving greatly," I said. "Keep it up." I smiled and dismissed him to go back to his desk.

By the end of the week, Dave's work was strongly average. Not genius level. Not bright. Dave had suddenly acquired the gift of averageness.

"It was his glasses," Jim Abbott whispered enticingly to me when I finally told him about Dave and he'd had a chance to speak with him and look over his recent work. "His eyes had changed, and the old glasses effectively blinded him. And when they broke. . . ."

Thus he tried to seduce me with rational explanations, reinforced by my husband and other teachers who also preferred life to be simple. Thus I passed on the explanation to a worried Dave and his tearful mother. Thus we let the situation stand.

But I will not attempt to explain the excellent molar I now have where one was pulled the month before. I will not explain away Herb's angelic behavior or the behavior of the three older boys who no longer extort lunch money from their classmates. I will never truly feel comfortable about my own explanation for my abrupt ride on that country road.

However, I suppose that I will have to write a book. I have a strong feeling that it will be excellent.

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Roger Zelazny made his first appearance in F&SF with the memorable "A Rose For Ecclesiastes" and followed that with "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth," (winner of a Nebula award) and two Hugo award-winning novels, AND CALL ME CONRAD and LORD OF LIGHT. His latest novel is a stunning blend of fantasy and science fiction that demonstrates why he is considered one of the finest stylists and storytellers in the field. It begins on page 5.

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